

Examining family engagement practices: A rural middle school case study

by

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B.S. Wichita State University, 2001
M.S., University of Nevada Las Vegas, 2004
M.S., University of Nevada Las Vegas, 2008

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine family engagement practices in a rural Midwestern middle school. Grounded in the National PTA Standards for Family-School Partnerships as a conceptual framework and utilizing the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework as a theoretical foundation, the study explored family engagement resources, student growth in the areas of academic, social-emotional, and general well-being, and meaningful communication with families. Using a qualitative case study design, the research employed interviews and focus groups with teachers, administrators, and parents to gather insights into their perceptions of family engagement. The significance of this study lies in its potential to reveal strategies that enhance family-school collaboration in rural settings, where resources and technological barriers pose unique challenges.

The investigation utilized a combination of individual interviews and focus groups to gather data on family engagement practices. The study identified key themes such as communication challenges, technology barriers, cultural inclusivity, and community partnerships. The findings underscore the importance of building robust communication infrastructures and culturally sensitive practices to foster meaningful family engagement in rural areas. The use of digital platforms has grown, but challenges remain, especially for non-English-speaking families, highlighting the need for ongoing adjustments to communication methods.

The study's findings revealed that family engagement has evolved into a more collaborative partnership, significantly impacting student academic outcomes and well-being. The behaviors and strategies employed by teachers and administrators, such as differentiated instruction, cultural sensitivity, and community involvement, were instrumental in supporting student success. Recommendations for future research include a deeper exploration of tailored

family engagement strategies for rural communities, with a focus on overcoming technological and linguistic barriers. These findings have significant implications for practice, as they highlight the necessity of flexible and inclusive family-school partnerships that can adapt to the unique needs of rural middle schools.

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Approved by:

Major Professor
Dr. Donna Augustine-Shaw

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Dedication

To my dearest, boys, Adam, Jaxen, and Jonas,

From the moment you came into my life, you brought boundless joy and purpose. This dissertation is a testament to the love, support, and inspiration you have provided throughout this journey.

Jaxen, your compassionate heart and gentle spirit have enriched our lives in ways words cannot express. Your kindness is a source of comfort, reminding us of the beauty in every moment.

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Together, you have been my greatest teachers. You've shown me the depths of resilience and the heights of imagination. Through every triumph and trial, you've stood by my side, filling my heart with pride and gratitude.

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This dissertation is as much yours as it is mine. It represents the values we hold dear - the pursuit of knowledge, the power of perseverance, and the importance of family.

To my boys - may you always approach life with the same curiosity, determination, and love that you have shown me. Remember, the sky is not the limit, it's just the beginning.

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With all my love and gratitude,

Kim

Preface

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a turning point in education, challenging educators, students, and families to swiftly adapt to remote and hybrid learning environments. As school closures and new instructional methods reshaped the learning process, traditional roles began to overlap, fostering closer, collaborative partnerships between parents and teachers to support student success. This evolution has left a lasting impact, as many initiatives born out of pandemic necessity have become central to educational practice. At the core of post pandemic reality is a critical need to examine family engagement strategies. Therefore, the lingering effects of the global pandemic are important to this study and contextual references are included throughout the dissertation.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

This study delves into the specific context of rural middle schools, aiming to examine the evolving landscape of family engagement practices from the perspectives of leaders, teachers, and parents. With the abrupt shift to remote learning and varied access to educational resources caused by the global pandemic, a pressing need exists to understand how family engagement has moved forward and further, impacted students' academic performance and well-being. This case study centers on a rural middle school to discern the unique challenges, successes, and adaptations in engaging families within this context.

To provide a brief historical context relative to this study, the spring of 2020, amid the COVID-19 outbreak, resulted in American public schools ceasing in-person classes as a precautionary measure. While some institutions transitioned to remote learning, others remained entirely closed. Early in the pandemic, researchers, such as Kuhfeld et al. (2020), drew insights from historical instances like summer breaks and weather-related closures to forecast the repercussions of COVID-induced school closures. Their prognosis anticipated adverse effects on PK-12 students' performance in both reading and mathematics, particularly noting a more substantial decline in math abilities. Moreover, they predicted a widening achievement gap between students who did and didn't have access to remote educational resources. The rapid shift in instructional platforms catapulted parent and family involvement into new and challenging roles.

Over time, educational researchers have delved into the repercussions of the initial shutdown and the enduring impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student achievement and other outcomes (Goldhaber et al., 2022; Kuhfeld et al., 2020; Kuhfeld et al., 2022; Sass & Goldring, 2021). Initial international studies indicated that the most disadvantaged groups would bear the

brunt of the pandemic's educational disruptions. Analyzing the effects of school closures during an eight-week lockdown in the Netherlands, a nation already well-equipped with a robust social safety net and widespread broadband access, researchers discovered disparities in student achievement equivalent to nearly one-fifth of a typical school year (Engzell et al., 2021). Particularly, students from disadvantaged backgrounds, hailing from less educated households, experienced the most significant impact, with disparities in achievement reaching up to 60 percent higher than those among the general student population (Engzell et al., 2021). Their findings suggest that nations less technologically prepared for remote learning might endure even more pronounced negative effects. The significant role of parents and families in student learning and well-being continued to intersect with these alarming inequalities.

Data in the United States confirmed similar results. Kuhfeld et al. (2020) scrutinized student progress data spanning fall 2019, fall 2020, and fall 2021, aiming to delineate COVID-19 related impacts on kindergarten through eighth grade reading and math scores. Analyzing data encompassing over 5.4 million students across third to eighth grades, the authors pinpointed the most significant dip in math achievement between fall 2019 and fall 2020, alongside substantial declines in reading proficiency from fall 2020 to fall 2021. Particularly in elementary grades, disparities in achievement based on poverty levels widened notably, reaching their peak during the 2020-2021 academic year. The authors underline that the scale of decline observed here surpassed that linked to prior school closures triggered by past disasters. In extensive national studies utilizing broad datasets, Goldhaber et al. (2022) corroborated those students from high-poverty schools, persisting with remote learning through the 2020-2021 academic year, encountered the most substantial setbacks in academic progress. Similarly, Sass and Goldring (2021), investigating achievement scores in the metro-Atlanta region, reached comparable

conclusions for students continuing remote instruction post-initial shutdown. Their research also highlighted a slower pace of achievement growth among students eligible for the free-reduced lunch program in comparison to their peers. This study is situated in the time period immediately following the global pandemic and the critical impact to student learning caused by wide-scale disruption to the teacher's role in student learning, replaced and/or supplemented by parents and families serving in the primary role of teacher. This study, designed to capture important perspectives of leaders, teachers, and parents, following this unforeseen disruption to the educational process, sheds light on the evolution and shift in family engagement practices, specifically, at the middle school level in a rural setting.

Lai and Widmar (2021) argue that school closure mandates affected rural schools in the United States differently compared to their urban counterparts. They highlight that despite shared challenges like poverty and homelessness, rural communities often lacked the essential infrastructure essential for transitioning to widespread online learning during the school shutdowns. The onset of the pandemic revealed a significant deficiency in broadband internet connectivity within many rural school communities (Lai & Widmar, 2021), compounding the factors intensifying the adverse consequences of school closures. In rural settings, where access to resources might be limited, family engagement was pivotal in supporting learning continuity. Families reinforced learning at home, supplementing potential gaps in resources that schools faced post-pandemic (Sheldon & Epstein, 2003). Rural areas often rely on tight-knit communities. Engaging families, as a critical component, fosters community collaboration and leverages local resources and expertise to support schools in overcoming challenges (Sheridan et al., 2008). The challenges rural schools face in fostering family engagement are further

complicated during the middle school years, a time when adolescents' growing desire for independence can make parental involvement more difficult.

The transition to middle school coincides with the onset of adolescence, a time of rapid physical, social, cognitive, and emotional development (Eccles et al., 1993). Early adolescents are developing a greater desire for increased autonomy; they want to establish their independence and want to know that the adults in their lives believe that they can and will be successful (Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Eccles et al., 1991; Flores de Apodaca et al., 2015; Goldstein et al., 2005). Although parents (a term used to include both biological and nonbiological custodial caregivers) generally want to support their young adolescents, the middle school context is more complex compared to elementary school. An adolescents' desire for autonomy often translates into a reluctance to share information about their lives outside the home with their parents (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Laird & Marrero, 2011). Consequently, parents are left wondering how to help when they see their young adolescents facing struggles that are inherent in adjusting to a new school environment. The convergence of adolescent development along with the transition into a new school setting can lead parents to struggle with finding effective ways of providing academic support; these frustrations sometimes leading to parents developing feelings of mistrust toward the school (Forsyth et al., 2011). However, educators can play a key role in helping parents learn how to support students during this important new phase of their lives (Duchesne et al., 2009; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Hill & Tyson, 2009).

The intricate interplay between adolescent development and the middle school transition underscores the pivotal role of family engagement in this critical time. As young adolescents embark on a journey marked by heightened autonomy and a quest for independence, the support and involvement of parents and caregivers become paramount (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Amidst the

complexity of the middle school years, where adolescents may hesitate to confide in their parents about their experiences outside the home, the importance of robust family engagement becomes evident. Parents' understanding and active involvement in their children's educational journey not only assists in navigating the challenges inherent in adjusting to a new school environment but also contributes significantly to providing essential academic support (Duchesne et al., 2009). Moreover, fostering strong family-school partnerships mitigates the risk of parents feeling disconnected or mistrustful of the school system. Strong family-school relations nurture a collaborative environment conducive to the holistic development of young adolescents. Hence, family engagement stands as a cornerstone, ensuring a supportive network that complements educators' efforts in guiding and nurturing students through this pivotal phase of their lives.

As they reflect on lessons learned, Ishimaru and Bang (2022) argue, we need to “recast families and communities as co-designers of education” rather than conceptualizing families as the recipients of services or even worse as barriers to implementation (Ishimaru et al., 2018, p. 42). Research emphasizes the important roles that parents and families play in student’s learning and development (Longhurst & Thier, 2021). Hence, post pandemic recovery efforts must focus on meaningful support for students and their families. Family engagement must be a critical component of all comprehensive school improvement efforts. Work in this area makes an important distinction between *family involvement* and *family engagement*. Family involvement often refers to the participation of parents and families in activities related to their student's education and school, whereas family engagement signifies a deeper, more collaborative partnership between schools and families, emphasizing shared responsibility and active involvement in supporting student learning and well-being (Gutman & Midgley, 2000). This distinction highlights involvement encompasses more surface-level activities, while engagement

involves a more comprehensive and sustained partnership between families and schools. The importance of delineating between family involvement and family engagement serves as the foundational premise for this qualitative case study. Recognizing the multifaceted roles of parents and families in the learning and development of students, particularly in the context of post pandemic efforts, underscores the necessity for meaningful support. This study aims to explore how fostering a deeper, collaborative partnership between schools and families emphasizing active involvement and shared responsibility can significantly contribute to supporting the academic progress and overall well-being of students. Schools and families must collaborate in what we have learned from the global pandemic to capitalize on deeper opportunities to strengthen family engagement during the middle-level years.

The road ahead for districts and schools will be challenging. Family engagement efforts will have to challenge the historic failures of school systems to effectively serve marginalized communities, including remote and rural locations. Educators can aid these efforts by fostering research-based approaches focused on developing family engagement practices grounded in educational equity and responsiveness. Without these efforts, school districts risk spending remaining and limited COVID-19 relief aid on programs and initiatives that don't meet the needs of students and families, closing the learning gaps and well-being support critical to students and families impacted by growing social-emotional needs, deficits, and challenges. Teachers, leaders, and parents must embrace learning from educational experiences in the past to embrace the possibilities and the future of family engagement practices that make a difference in the lives of youth.

This study examined how teachers, leaders, and parents define and perceive impactful family engagement practices. The study specifically focuses on defining these practices in

alignment with the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) National Standards for Family School Partnerships (National Parent Teacher Association, 2000). It seeks to understand how these stakeholders conceptualize and interpret effective strategies for engaging families in the educational process at the middle school level within the context of a rural setting.

Conceptual Framework: National PTA Standards for Family School Partnerships

The National PTA standards for Family School Partnerships (National Parent Teacher Association, 2002) focus on what families, schools, and communities can do together to support positive student outcomes. The National PTA standards for Family School Partnerships are endorsed by the mid-western state's governing state board of education in this study. This document contains six standards that provide a framework for achieving a high standard of engagement for families and the community. Each of the six standards includes quality indicators for successful partnerships. The standards further highlight steps schools can take to achieve the goals outlined in the standards which build and sustain an empowering culture as school districts work to improve their family-school partnerships. The standards include a focus on helping each student thrive and focus on the following areas as essential to working towards this goal: 1) Welcome All Families, 2) Communicate Effectively, 3) Support Student Success, 4) Speak Up for Every Child, 5) Share Power, and 6) Collaborate with the Community (National Parent Teacher Association, 2000).

These standards are important because they provide a framework for schools and educational institutions to establish and maintain strong partnerships with families. These partnerships are crucial for the overall success and well-being of students. The standards address the following topics important to quality family engagement practices in schools (National Parent Teacher Association, 2000).

1. **Welcome All Families:** This standard emphasizes inclusivity and making sure that all families, regardless of their background, feel valued and welcomed in the school community. When families feel welcome, they are more likely to be engaged and involved in their child's education.
2. **Communicate Effectively:** Effective communication between schools and families is essential for sharing important information, updates, and progress reports about students. Clear and transparent communication helps build trust and ensures that everyone is on the same page regarding a student's education.
3. **Support Student Success:** This standard focuses on providing resources, guidance, and support to help each student thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. When schools work closely with families, they can identify and address specific needs and challenges that individual students may face.
4. **Speak Up for Every Child:** This standard encourages advocacy for each and every student. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing and addressing the unique needs and strengths of each student, ensuring that they receive the support and resources they require to succeed.
5. **Share Power:** This standard involves giving families a voice in decision-making processes related to education. When families are actively involved in shaping policies and practices, it leads to a more inclusive and equitable educational experience for all students.
6. **Collaborate with the Community:** Engaging with the broader community helps create a support network around the school. Community involvement can provide additional

resources, expertise, and opportunities for students, enriching their educational experience.

Overall, these standards work together to create a positive and inclusive learning environment where students can thrive. When schools and families collaborate effectively, it leads to better outcomes for students and a stronger sense of community within the school. These standards will serve as the conceptual framework upon which the inquiry in this study will unfold. They provide a comprehensive guide for schools to establish and maintain effective family-school partnerships, ensuring a conducive environment for student success.

Theoretical Framework: Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework

The Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (Rural Policy Research Institute, n.d.) takes a comprehensive approach to understanding wealth in the context of rural economic development. It defines wealth broadly, encompassing physical, financial, human, natural, and social forms of capital. This inclusive definition allows for a nuanced exploration of how different forms of wealth interact and contribute to the well-being of rural communities. The Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RPRI, n.d.) incorporates eight distinct types of assets. When taken together, these capitals represent a robust and comprehensive measure of both tangible and intangible wealth, and they create the basis for assessing current well-being, as well as improving the future. Financial capital is defined as the stock of money and other liquid financial assets (e.g. stocks, bonds, and letters of credit) that can be readily converted to money. Intellectual capital is defined as the stock of human knowledge, innovation, and ideas embedded throughout a society. This includes intellectual property (e.g. patents and copyrights) as well as common knowledge. Human capital is defined as the stock of productive capabilities of the individuals in a population, embodied in the education, skills, talents, and health status of the

people. Social capital is defined as the stock of trust, relationships, and networks found in civil society. Social capital can be held by individuals as well as groups and organizations. Cultural capital is defined as the stock of practices, values, and sense of identity embedded in a society. Cultural capital is held by individuals and groups. Tangible examples include works of art, architecture, monuments, and places of significance. Intangible examples include beliefs, traditions, and practices that distinguish and identify groups of people and their values and identity. Political capital is defined as the stock of influence, power, and goodwill held by individuals, groups, and organizations that are held, spent, or shared to achieve specific goals. Physical capital is defined as the stock of built assets, including equipment, buildings, roads, bridges, telecommunications networks, and other types of physical infrastructure. Finally, natural capital is defined as the stock of resources provided by nature, including clean water, clean air, climate, land, flora (forests and vegetation), and fauna (wildlife). This holistic perspective recognizes that a thriving community is built on a combination of these diverse assets (RPRI, n.d.).

In addition, the framework highlights the importance of development strategies in shaping the dynamics of wealth within a rural context. It delves into the ways in which initiatives and interventions can impact the distribution and sustainability of wealth. By considering both regional and resident-owned wealth, as well as the distinction between privately and publicly owned wealth, the framework provides a nuanced lens through which to analyze the complexities of rural economic development.

In rural communities, the school often serves as a central hub and major employer, playing a pivotal role in the economic development or potential collapse of the community. The Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework's acknowledgment of the interconnectedness of

different forms of capital resonates with the study on impactful family engagement practices in a rural middle school setting, as it recognizes that the school, as a key institution, significantly influences the distribution and sustainability of wealth within the community (RUPRI, n.d.). Effective family engagement practices in education can serve as a catalyst for not only enhancing human and social capital but also for fostering a positive economic environment within the broader rural setting.

In this context, the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.) serves as the theoretical framework by offering a broad, multidimensional perspective on wealth creation in rural communities, encompassing physical, financial, human, natural, and social capital. This theoretical foundation allows for a deeper understanding of how these forms of wealth are interconnected and contribute to the well-being of rural areas. The national PTA standards, on the other hand, provide specific, actionable guidelines for impactful family engagement practices. These standards offer a concrete approach to fostering human and social capital in rural schools, aligning with the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework's (RUPRI, n.d.) emphasis on the school as a key institution influencing community wealth distribution and sustainability. Together, these frameworks guide the analysis of family engagement in rural educational settings, linking theory with practice.

Rationale

Research by Henderson and Mapp (2002) highlights that the national PTA standards, highlighting the importance of family-school partnerships, serve as crucial benchmarks, guiding stakeholders to identify and implement effective family engagement practices. These standards offer a foundation for teachers, leaders, and parents to understand and align their efforts with recognized best practices. Epstein (2011) emphasizes collaboration among stakeholders for

impactful family engagement. The national PTA standards provide a framework that encourages teachers, leaders, and parents to work together, fostering a shared understanding and coordinated efforts to support student learning in rural middle schools, specific to this study. Sheldon and Epstein (2005) underline the challenges faced by rural schools in implementing family engagement practices. These sources highlight that national standards in family-school partnerships must consider and address the unique contextual factors within rural settings, ensuring the relevance and adaptability of engagement strategies. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) showcase the positive correlation between effective family engagement practices and improved student outcomes. Applying national standards to family engagement in rural middle schools could lead to enhanced academic achievement and overall student well-being. Henderson and Mapp (2002) emphasize that understanding stakeholders' definitions of impactful family engagement practices informs policymaking. Utilizing national standards as a guide assists policymakers in formulating targeted strategies and resource allocation for effective family engagement initiatives in rural middle schools. To reflect on lessons learned in the historical context of the pandemic, educators and schools must consider the power and importance of family education in the future and open the doors to exploring and thinking about how family engagement practices truly can make a difference in student learning and well-being.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore the perceptions of school and district leaders, teachers, and parents regarding family engagement in a mid-western rural school district at the middle-school level. Grounded in the theoretical framework of the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.), this study will examine how various forms of capital intersect and shape family engagement practices within the school community. Additionally, the

study will explore the connection between the National PTA standards for Family-School partnerships (National Parent Teacher Association, 2000) to provide insights on family engagement in this rural middle school setting. It will also analyze the implications of practice and resource allocation in building a strong home-school partnership that supports student learning. These findings aim to inform more effective strategies, improve outcomes, and foster a more meaningful, collaborative relationship between families and schools, contributing to the holistic development of rural communities.

Research Questions

This research study contains one overarching question and four sub-questions that provide the framework for investigation and exploration. The over-arching research question is: How do leaders, teachers, and parents define impactful family engagement practices at the middle school level in a rural school district, based on the National PTA Family-School Partnership standards and the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework? The sub-questions for the study include:

1. How do leaders (i.e., superintendent and principal) describe family engagement resources, information about student growth (i.e., academic, social-emotional, general well-being), and meaningful communication with families?
2. How do teachers describe family engagement resources, information about student growth (i.e., academic, social-emotional, general well-being), and meaningful communication with families?
3. How do parents describe family engagement resources, information about student growth (i.e., academic, social-emotional, general well-being), and meaningful communication with families?

4. What can we learn about family engagement practices from the national PTA standards and the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework to strengthen family-school partnerships?

Research Design

This study used a qualitative case study to best understand the perceptions of leaders, teachers, and parents of family engagement in a rural middle school setting. The methodology allows the researcher to dive deeper into each participant's individual meaning-making around family engagement using interviews and focus groups. The participants will be recruited from a rural midwestern middle school. The district superintendent, building principal, four classroom teachers, four 7th grade parents and four 8th grade parents were recruited. Each participant contributed valuable perceptions through an interview and a focus group for each of the respective groups. The study's findings were developed and coded by themes to describe and represent the data collected. The thematic intersections of the three participant groups will be presented.

Subjectivity Statement

In qualitative research, a significant contribution to the data collection and analysis process was the researcher herself. The researcher served as the primary research instrument and research tool, and therefore, the researcher must acknowledge their own bias, limitations, and views. Stake (1995) described the many roles that the researcher plays: teacher, participant, observer, interviewer, reader, storyteller, advocate, artist, counselor, evaluator, consultant, and others. Stake (1995) noted that even though research can sometimes seem prescribed and restrictive; the styles, design, and writing of the researcher can vary considerably. He believed that the researcher determines how much emphasis to place on each role.

Growing up, the researcher was the second oldest of a well-respected, hardworking, middle-class family in a rural town. The researcher came from a family whose father was the first to graduate college. The mother stayed home with the children until the youngest sibling went to school. The researcher grew up attending the same schools as her parents, sharing some of the same teachers and forming unique intergenerational connections within the educational community.

The researcher's career in education spanned twenty years; affording an opportunity to interact with urban and rural school districts in this mid-western state. The researcher spent the first years of her professional career teaching elementary school. Then the researcher served as an instructional coach, coordinator/director in assessment, and superintendent/elementary principal. Currently, the researcher is an educational leader serving school districts in a Midwestern state. In this role, the researcher interacts with multiple school districts and supports the implementation of positive family engagement protocols as part of the consulting support to schools. Due to the researcher's role and history in education, she has relationships with some study participants. Because of the knowledge of the researcher as a consultant engaged in innovative family engagement practices, the researcher selected this site to best answer the inquiry and research questions posed by this study. Because of these experiences and knowledge, it was important for the researcher to closely adhere and establish credibility in data collection, analysis, and interpretation of this qualitative case study and to ensure important measures of trustworthiness and ethical practices.

Limitations of the Study

The primary limitation of the study was related to the data collection portion of this qualitative case study. The interviews were conducted with a superintendent, principal, teachers,

and parents; therefore, reliance on self-disclosure was a factor. Although participants were asked to reflect and describe their own assumptions and connections with family engagement, one's ability to self-assess can be a limitation.

As participant-researcher, I carry my own assumptions about family engagement practices. I have my own interpretations and understandings, as do the participants. The researcher, due to their role as a professional educator in this state, has relationships with some stakeholders participating in the study. The nature of rural settings naturally lends itself to potential interactions that may have caused limitations due to these relationships. Lastly, the study concentrated on interview and focus group methods as the main source for information. While some observation occurred within the interview settings, the study was limited to these methods, time, and place.

Delimitations of the Study

There were many parameters established for this study. Those invited to participate in this qualitative single case study were currently serving in the roles of superintendent, principal, teacher, and parent. There were many other participants that could have been selected for this study. The researcher worked with the principal to identify teacher and parent participants for this qualitative case study that would provide the most relevant perceptions and experiences related to answer the research questions outlined in the study.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined as they relate to the topic of this study and importance to this dissertation:

Family engagement: Shared responsibility among families, schools, and communities for student learning and achievement. It is continuous throughout a student's educational journey

and encompasses active participation in learning, including at home, in school, and in the community (National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement, 2020).

This will serve as the epitome definition of family engagement practices employed by this study.

Family involvement: Participation in any type of school-sponsored event, either in the community, at the school, or at home by a family member. While most research uses the term parental involvement, the term family involvement will be used in the same manner that others use parental involvement. The terms parental involvement and family involvement will be used interchangeably in the study.

Middle School: The middle school at this school site included seventh and eighth grade students.

Rural: A mid-western area that has a population of less than 50,000 people in territory, population, and housing area (United States Census Bureau, 2010).

Summary

Chapter 1 introduced the background and purpose of this study, explaining the importance of understanding the historical and current context of family engagement in rural schools. It briefly discussed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education, particularly highlighting the effects on family engagement and student outcomes, especially in rural settings. It discussed studies predicting and confirming the decline in academic performance, due to school closures. The chapter emphasized the pivotal role of family engagement in supporting student learning at the middle school level, suggesting a shift from mere involvement to deeper engagement between schools and families. The National PTA Standards for Family-School Partnerships (National Parent Teacher Association, 2000) will serve as the conceptual framework for the study to explore perceptions of family engagement in a rural school district. Additionally,

the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.) will serve as the theoretical framework, providing a lens to understand how various forms of rural wealth, including social, cultural, and financial capital, impact family-school collaboration. Together, these frameworks guide the exploration of leadership behaviors, school policies, and community efforts that influence engagement, with a focus on communication strategies, inclusivity, and academic support. This study aims to understand how leaders, teachers, and parents define impactful family engagement practices.

Chapter 2 presents a deep understanding of existing literature, offering a detailed exploration of family engagement in education. This comprehensive review encompasses historical perspectives, current practices, and prospects while addressing unique challenges and opportunities posed by factors in rural environments at the middle school level.

Chapter 2 - Review of the Literature

This review of existing literature focuses on the following topics: (a) History of family engagement, (b) Traditional family involvement, (c) Title I implications for family engagement, (d) Parental involvement and student achievement, (e) Why it is important to include families, (f) Stakeholder perceptions of parent engagement (g) Family engagement through the pandemic, (h) Reframing family involvement, (i) Family engagement in rural settings, (j) Family engagement resources and educational practices, (k) Family engagement and funding, (l) An educational platform of promise, and (m) Partnerships for the future.

By addressing these diverse topics, the literature review aims to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of family engagement in education, encompassing historical perspectives, current practices, and future outlooks. It also considers specific challenges and opportunities important to rural settings and middle level education.

History of Family Engagement

In order to understand how family engagement has become a pivotal component in our current educational systems, it is important to reflect on the evolution of family engagement throughout history. There is a history of federal, state, and local policies mandating that schools create partnerships with parents and communities. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 2001) required that all schools receiving Title I funding be required to develop parental involvement policies, provide materials for home support, offer clearly understood communication about school progress, explain state standards and assessments, and offer opportunities for leadership and decision making (Amodeo & Amodeo, 2004; Epstein, 2004).

Formal parent involvement in education can be traced back to the formation in 1897 of the National Congress of Mothers, the predecessor to the Parent Teacher Association (Watson, et al., 2012). Since that time, parent involvement has evolved to include the enactment of Project Head Start in 1964, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), and the Handicap Act of 1974, all of which mandated parent involvement in school activities. In 2001, NCLB, reauthorized in 2015 as the ESEA, addressed the role that families should play in children's education. The new policy tied federal funding to school initiatives to involve families in the educational process (Watson et al., 2012). The impetus for each of these policies was a foundational understanding of the value of the family in supporting students' education.

Research on the topic of family engagement points to the positive influence it has on student learning, but much of this research is founded on a traditional and middle-class concept of what involvement should entail, with little regard to culture or family context, and focuses largely on the relationship between home and school (Greene, 2013; Ule et al., 2015). By viewing involvement through this lens, school personnel may conclude that parents who do not attend school events do not care about their student's learning, without understanding the cultural factors at play (Poza et al., 2014). Recent immigrants to the United States, for example, typically value education as a route to a better life for their children but may not feel equipped to demonstrate their support by participating in school activities, instead encourage home-based learning such as homework (Tang, 2015). Many African American families, conversely, support their student's learning by teaching them to be independent and holding high expectations for their academic achievement (Greene, 2013).

In addition to differing expectations regarding school involvement, barriers may exist that prevent families from participating in school activities. Yoder and Lopez (2013) determined

families with low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds face many barriers to participating in school events, including financial constraints, lack of transportation, little access to technology, and language or cultural obstacles. Williams and Sanchez (2013) also identified these as well as other barriers, including time, poverty, and lack of awareness, as factors that prevent families from participating in school-based opportunities for involvement. Hampden-Thomas and Galindo (2017) found a positive correlation between school-family interactions, family satisfaction with the school, and subsequent family engagement. Considering the significant issues concerning families of low socioeconomic backgrounds and their relationships with schools and teachers, future research is necessary to more closely examine how these families view their relationships with their student's school personnel.

Research points to the positive effects of parent involvement on student achievement, and, as a result, many state and federal initiatives over the past 50 years have sought to compel schools to encourage parent involvement. Most recently, the NCLB Act of 2001, reauthorized as the ESEA, includes a requirement for meaningful parent participation in school activities (NCLB, 20 U.S.C. 6301, Sec. 1001 [12]), stipulating that schools cannot receive Title 1 funding reserved for disadvantaged students without a written agreement to facilitate the involvement of parents. While schools across the nation strive to implement various efforts to involve parents, the focus is typically narrow and tends to emphasize the impact of the home on academic achievement, with school performance a primary incentive for involving families. Jefferson (2015) stated educators must shift their thinking away from a perception of families as compliant and cooperative partners whose purpose is to help the school attain its goals, primarily related to student achievement, to a more critical understanding of the interactions between families and schools. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), in their

position statement on quality Early Childhood Program Standards, emphasized the importance of collaborative family-teacher relationships that are sensitive to all cultures and backgrounds (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2005), supporting the critical importance of authentic, reciprocal school-home relationships.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) broadly characterized parent involvement as home-based and school-based. Home-based activities are those that focus on learning behavior outside of school, such as helping a child study for a test or monitoring homework. School-based activities include parent-teacher conferences, volunteering, and attending school functions. Also important is the impetus for the involvement, specifically whether it is to enhance a student's educational experience, or a reaction to a problem situation (Hampden-Thompson et al., 2013). More recently, parent involvement has evolved to encompass the idea of "engagement". Goodall and Montgomery (2014) described parent engagement as an on-going process, to be approached each year as a new cohort of parents enters the school. They described engagement as going beyond participation in an activity, to having a sense of ownership and a greater sense of commitment than simple involvement offers.

Parents and their roles in schools, public or private, often become the bed for heated discussions. "Parent involvement" is yesterday's buzz word; today, it is "family involvement". The phrase "parent involvement" connotes an image of parents being involved in their student's education. Typically, the model is a one-way "flow of information between schools and parents" (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001, p. 2). Family involvement is a more encompassing concept, embracing the multiple types of parent structures. Family involvement is conceptualized as a "joint relationship among the family, (parent or caretaker) and the school staff with a focus on the child's education" (Amatea, 2009, p. 27). Researchers (Henderson et al., 2007) provide us

with a synthesis of studies that support family engagement, the goal of which is to improve the academic achievement of students. As the debate continues, it's crucial to recognize that both parent and family involvement play pivotal roles in a student's educational journey. Moving beyond the traditional one-way flow of information, the concept of family engagement emphasizes a collaborative relationship between parents, caretakers, and school staff, all centered around the child's education. This holistic approach underscores the collective effort required to enhance academic achievements of students. In an era where inclusivity and diverse family structures are increasingly prevalent, acknowledging and nurturing family involvement in education is more vital than ever. It's a testament to the collective power of communities in shaping the future of our children (Henderson et al., 2007).

Despite this research, many administrators and teachers do not reach out to students' parents. For them, family engagement is selective, allowing only a few to use the keys of the schoolhouse door. Families are allowed to get involved, but their engagement in the actual learning process is minimal. Parents must resort to opportunities for learning at home through support in homework, reading, and enrichment activities (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

In some schools' outreach literature, traditional definitions of parent involvement express a microscopic sensitivity to family. Parent involvement remains primarily a matter of "big brother" as the expert who reaches out only to those families who need support for their children who have academic and social difficulties. The reality is that school personnel's knowledge about the families of students is minimal (McDermott, 2008). Some researchers are now calling for teachers and administrators to embrace a higher level of family participation with the more encompassing term of "family engagement". Engagement connotes a richer association between

the home and the school. Unfortunately, these calls often go unheeded because, in many instances, "engagement" merely replaces "involvement" without any realization of change.

Probing for research on parent/family involvement/engagement brings interesting results. In 2003, Constantino wrote a small book titled *Engaging All Families* (2003). In the "Why Family Agreement?" section, Constantino (2003) encourages school leaders to develop a positive school culture that welcomes families into the school. He then outlines four spheres of influence: schools, peers, individual students, and families. These spheres result in a continuum of student engagement from minimal to significant. The author concludes that schools can promote engagement of high school students by encouraging involvement of families in their learning and by supporting programs that have both instructional and non-instructional natures.

The first and most significant sphere of influence for engagement of students is the school. Students engaged in their schools create a sense of belonging and carve out avenues for their participation. The family is another sphere of influence and, coupled with school support, provides motivation for students to do well and to achieve at the highest level.

Following Constantino, other researchers explored additional areas that are challenging for schools and also require bold moves toward change (Weiss & Lopez, 2009). These researchers write that family engagement needs to be a shared responsibility with levels of commitment by the family, the school, and supporting agencies. Family engagement spans the life of the child but is not the same from year to year because roles change throughout the span of this commitment. Finally, they emphasize that engagement is not limited to the home and the school; community programs must play a vital role as well (Weiss & Lopez, 2009).

Simultaneously, the word needs to get out to families through leadership-development training sessions, listening to parents, and conducting workshops that help families understand

how students learn (Weiss & Lopez, 2009). An essential component of moving toward engagement is to assess positive success, the challenges, and the realities of what is not working. If school districts want to assess meaningful engagement, then everyone needs to be involved in data collection and analysis to initiate better understanding. What is learned needs to be used to continue to make changes for new planning and meaningful change. Powerful change that enables a transition from "parent involvement" to "family engagement" requires a set of systematic steps with related meaningful, outcome-based activities. School districts should begin with a framework of questions to initiate the formidable task of moving from parent involvement to family engagement.

Family engagement is not a new concept in education, nor is its effect on student learning overly controversial. For instance, Weiss (2014) comments that there is “a skyscraper of research that supports the fact that family engagement is one of, if not the strongest predictor, of what happens to children” (p. 14). Educators and policymakers continue to underscore the importance of families in the educational experiences of students (Coady, 2019), and research in this area demonstrates the varying roles that families play in student learning (Jeynes, 2003). Family engagement is particularly challenging for rural schools when families are geographically distant from each other or from community resources, centers, or the school itself. Furthermore, family engagement becomes more complex when families speak and use minoritized or indigenous languages, or when teachers, leaders, and staff are underprepared for linguistic diversity (Coady, 2019; Lucas, 2011).

One issue that arises in the literature on family engagement for rural multilingual families is the “geographical blindness” that characterizes traditional, metro-centric educational policies, practices, and teacher education programs (Eppley, 2015). Roberts and Green (2013) also

highlight this issue, emphasizing its significance in the context of family engagement for multilingual families in rural areas. Similarly, research on family engagement continues to characterize those practices using both a monolingual orientation (Epstein, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2017) and/or a metro-centric orientation of schools, where geography and space are absent from the pragmatic considerations of family engagement (Epstein, 2011; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Home languages of families, cultural backgrounds, and migration experiences are complex social characteristics that should inform how educators build relationships with families and students in rural schools. In this context, “monolingual” refers to individuals who speak only one language (Smith, 2013).

This section has reviewed the history of family engagement to dig deeper in understanding the perspective of traditional family engagement. When exploring the history of family engagement, it is also important to understand the federal requirements for family engagement. At the school level, this federal requirement is addressed by Title 1 funding.

Traditional Family Involvement

What is family involvement? The concept of involving families in school learning has evolved over time (Hiatt-Michael, 2007). Where involvement originated as notification of upcoming events at school and volunteering time in the classroom, involvement has become more engaged with purpose (Funkhouser & Gonzales, 1997; Hiatt-Michael, 2010). Some may still consider involvement to center on providing information related to school routines, experiences, learning, and events. Others may view involvement as the engaged partnership between families and school staff. It is through this partnership that families feel valued for their own culture and experiences, as well as their role as the first teacher of their children (Hiatt-Michael, 2010). It is through the evolution of valuing families, both in their culture and their

experiences, which has transformed involvement into engagement. Involvement is so much more than setting up a class party or bringing snacks to teachers after a long week of testing. To truly provide an engaging experience for families, a mutual partnership must be established within the school and expand into the home, engaging both school and family in agreed-upon goals (Hiatt-Michael, 2007).

By addressing what is at the heart of involvement, we find that engagement may be a more fitting word for the actions that are present in a school environment where families are valued for their role in the life of their student. Family engagement is the inclusion and participation of families within the realm of education, including opportunities and experiences to partake in meaningful interactions with their own children in and out of the school setting (Wilder, 2014). It is through these engaging experiences that educators, families, and administration have realized the power families have regarding the educational success of their student. No matter what form of engagement that takes place, students will have noticeable gains in their learning when this partnership is strong (Nisbet, 2021).

Family involvement has taken many forms through history and the educational timeline. From a traditional standpoint, family involvement has sometimes been misinterpreted or underestimated within the school system and in society (Wilder, 2014). Involvement has sometimes been viewed as volunteering for field trips and donating baked goods for fundraisers. In addition, by limiting families' interactions to volunteer work and monetary donations, schools have created barriers to participation and a lack of care regarding what happens daily within the walls of the classroom. Many families are unable to be present during the school day due to work schedules and a quick solution for some school staff has been to offer these parents the opportunity to donate materials, gifts, or money as a substitute for not being physically present. It

is from this very perception that the value of the family has been downplayed in the school setting and limited in scope. As a better understanding of the history of family engagement and the traditional perspective of family involvement is garnered, it is also important to review perspectives on parental involvement and the impact on student achievement through federal legislation.

Title I Implications for Family Engagement

The Title I, Part A program developed out of the ESEA of 1965 and the NCLB from 2001. The Title I, Part A program is designed to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and achieve, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and assessments. The program's goal is accomplished by providing supplemental funding for educational programs to Title I, Part A schools, which have a high percentage of students living in poverty.

Title I, Part A school programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2002) are implemented on either a school-wide or targeted assistance basis. A school-wide program permits a school with 40 percent or greater of its students at the poverty level to use funds from Title I, Part A and other federal education program funds and resources to improve the educational program of the entire school in order to raise academic achievement for all students. This contrasts with the targeted assistance program, through which Title I, Part A funds are used only to provide supplementary educational services for eligible students who are economically disadvantaged.

Title I, Part A also includes provisions to engage parents in the education process, which helps schools and parents share accountability for high student achievement. The provisions include expanded public-school choice, a broader range of supplemental educational services, local development of parental involvement plans, and building parents' capacity for using

effective practices to improve their students' academic achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). The program gives parents the opportunity to be informed at all levels of implementation.

Title I is important to family engagement because it specifically focuses on ensuring that all children, regardless of their economic background, have access to a high-quality education. It provides federal funding to schools with a high percentage of students from low-income families, aiming to bridge the achievement gap and improve educational outcomes for these students. Overall, Title I places a strong emphasis on family engagement because it recognizes that parents are a child's first and most influential teachers. When parents are actively involved in their child's education, it has a positive and lasting impact on their academic success and overall well-being.

Parental Involvement and Student Achievement

Positive impacts of parental involvement on student academic outcomes have not only been recognized by school administrators and teachers, but also by policymakers who have interwoven different aspects of parental involvement in new educational initiatives and reforms (Graves & Wright, 2011; Larocque et al., 2011; Mattingly et al., 2002; Topor et al., 2010). “The idea that parents can change their children’s educational trajectories by engaging with their children’s schooling has inspired a generation of school reform policies” (Domina, 2005, p. 245). The significance of parental involvement was clearly emphasized and delineated in the NCLB (Title I, Part A). More specifically, schools were instructed to engage families in the education of their children and encourage the participation of parents in regular, two-way communication involving student academic achievement and various school activities (ED.gov., 2013). Due to the pressure from administration applied by partially tying funding of schools to successful parental involvement programs (Gonzales-DeHass et al., 2005), and adoption of multiple reforms

that incorporate parental involvement as one of their integral parts, schools across the United States have been working on designing and implementing various parental involvement initiatives in the hope of improving student academic performance.

Basing the development of such initiatives on a strong research foundation is imperative, especially considering the number of resources dedicated to parental involvement programs across the nation (Domina, 2005; Shaver & Walls, 1998). However, providing the best empirical evidence for purposes of informing policy or practice is not an easy task. The abundance of research on parental involvement makes it difficult for policymakers to distinguish between individual studies and objectively select high-quality research to serve as the basis of their decisions (Andrews & Harlen, 2006). A wide range of research on parental involvement, reflected in different study methodologies, sampling processes, research questions, and findings, is evident in the literature (Andrews & Harlen, 2006; Barnett-Paige & Thomas, 2009; Suri & Clarke, 2009). The qualitative and quantitative research syntheses can effectively “match the existing research to the requirements of policymakers and practitioners” (Andrews & Harlen, 2006, p. 288), ensuring that the resources are dedicated to the appropriate parental involvement initiatives.

A lack of consensus regarding parental involvement begins with a definition of the construct, and the fact that “despite its intuitive meaning, the operational use of parental involvement has not been clear and consistent” (Fan & Chen, 2001, p. 3). Definitions vary from inclusive, such as the one provided by Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) who define parental involvement as “the dedication of resources by the parent to the child within a given domain” (p. 238) and Larocque, Kleiman, and Darling (2011) who state that “family involvement can be generally defined as the parents’ or caregivers’ investment in the education of their children” (p.

116). More specific definitions encompass parental involvement as “parents’ behaviors in home and school setting[s] meant to support their children’s educational progress” (El Noka et al., 2010, p. 989) also exist. In some studies, however, researchers choose to avoid a general definition of parental involvement and instead they focus on specific types of involvement exhibited by parents such as active participation in homework supervision, regular communication with teachers regarding student's progress, and involvement in extracurricular activities within the school environment (Kohl et al., 2000).

In essence, family and parental involvement provide a strong foundation for a child's educational journey (Shaver & Walls, 1998). This nurtures a holistic approach to learning that encompasses not only academic growth, but also personal and social development. Understanding these definitions and their differences is crucial because it enables educators, policymakers, and parents to adopt a more inclusive and effective approach to supporting children's education. It recognizes that family structures vary widely, and a one-size-fits-all model of parental involvement may not be sufficient to meet the diverse needs of students. By appreciating the broader concept of family involvement, stakeholders can work together to create environments where all parents, regardless of their circumstances, feel valued and empowered in their student's educational journey.

It is believed that the relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement is impacted by various factors. Some of the most prominent, and thus most frequently investigated factors, include ethnicity, prior achievement, and socio-economic status (Kohl et al., 2000). Therefore, research studies that manage to control the effects of some of these variables, although rare, are valuable and able to provide a more realistic picture of the effect of parental involvement on student achievement. For example, after controlling a child's

ability, socio-economic status, and ethnicity, Zellman and Waterman's (1998) findings indicated a significant positive correlation between parental in-school involvement and student reading scores. Additionally, after controlling children's intelligence, Topor et al. (2010) argued that parental involvement was significantly related to academic performance and children's perception of cognitive competence. It should be noted that in this study, parental involvement was measured by teachers' perceptions of the positive attitude's parents had toward their children's education, teachers, and schools. It did not, however, consider any parental involvement in school or at home, hence, casting a shadow of doubt on the validity of the results. Similar concerns were raised regarding Izzo et al.'s (1999) study results that indicated parental involvement was a significant predictor of student academic achievement. The problem arose when some of the reported significant correlations became non-significant once the previous student performance was controlled. These studies are just a few examples that highlight the complex phenomena and inconsistencies of examining research findings related to family involvement.

Literature searches using the keywords "parental involvement" and "academic achievement" yield thousands of entries, many of them representing scholarly research of the effects of parental involvement on academic achievement of children at various levels of education (Eccles et al., 1993). To summarize and yield more generalizable results regarding the relationship between parental involvement and student academic achievement, numerous meta-analyses were conducted over the past two decades. Although the overall goals of these meta-analyses aligned, their findings differed, confirming the need for a systematic research review of these results. In conclusion, navigating the intricate relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement requires a nuanced understanding of the various influencing factors,

such as ethnicity, prior achievement, and socio-economic status. While some studies manage to isolate these variables, others raise valid concerns about the methodologies employed. The wealth of research on this topic underscores its significance, yet the divergent findings in meta-analyses highlight the complexity of this field, emphasizing the necessity for a comprehensive and systematic review of existing results.

While the findings of this meta-synthesis confirmed the significant role of parental involvement in the academic achievement of students, there are still certain questions that may require deeper inquiry (Fan & Chen, 2001). The impact of parental involvement seems to hold across the various measures of academic achievement, but how the strength of that impact varies based on the assessment type remains unclear. There are plausible rationales for promoting both standardized and non-standardized measures to more effectively capture the impact of parental involvement on academic achievement, but there is still no sufficient evidence that confirms that one type of measure is more appropriate than the other (Fan & Chen, 2001).

Some components of parental involvement, such as home supervision or attending school activities, are relatively independent of any subject area. With that in mind, the contradictory results of just how big the moderating effect of the subject area has on the relationship between parental involvement and achievement may not be that concerning. However, different types of parental involvement, such as parental expectations, may be closely tied with the subject area. Additional research exploring the effect of various disciplines on the impact of different components of parental involvement on academic achievement is needed (Fan & Chen, 2001).

Finally, a surprising, but often seen, lack of positive impact of homework involvement on a student's academic outcomes warrants additional research. The purpose of this research is not to confirm or refute these findings. We are at the point where we must accept the nature of the

relationship between homework assistance and student academic performance. Providing an explanation of this relationship, however, needs to be based, not only on our beliefs and experiences as teachers or parents, but also on empirically sound findings. Considering that the most commonly practiced form of parental involvement is homework assistance, it is imperative to conduct both quantitative and qualitative studies with an intention of determining how this particular type of parental involvement can lead to improvement in academic performance of students (Eccles et al., 1993). All these aforementioned studies and sometimes inclusive results, lay the groundwork for this study as it explains the critical relationship between the home, parental engagement, and school in supporting student learning and success.

Why It Is Important to Include Families

When discussing family engagement, it's important to note that generally, parents want to be included in the learning of their student at school. When families are embraced and welcomed in the school learning environment, students are more connected with school and better able to develop positive relationships with their peers, teachers, and thinking regarding learning (Comer & Haynes, 1991). With over thirty years of research to support how essential family involvement is for student success, districts and individual school buildings should have parent and family involvement efforts at the forefront of year-long planning (Nisbet, 2021). Increased participation from family members in the school setting impacts students' desire to be in school and raises attendance and grades (Paul, 2020). It is through shared goal setting, collaboration, and communication that relationships are built and sustained in the school setting. By creating a culture of collaboration and community with families through strategic experiences and opportunities, families desire to become engaged in their student's learning as well as advocate for student needs (Funkhouser & Gonzales, 1997).

When considering families and students, family involvement can make a significant difference in student outcomes (Castro et al., 2015). Simply informing families can increase family understanding of class work and provide clarity regarding teaching goals. The more involved families are in school-based learning, the better the outcomes are for students (Hindin, 2010). Some of the more traditional roles parents play include volunteering in classrooms, being present for conferences, attending field trips, and planning for class parties. Some schools provide meaningful efforts to welcome families through classroom visits, a school open house, engaging families in activities after school, all school assemblies where families are welcomed, and invitations to school award ceremonies (Castro et al., 2015). Allowing families to feel welcome in the school is essential to developing strong relationships that last but the collaboration does not stop there. There is no reason for families to not be included in conversations and discussions at the district, school, and classroom level. More in-depth and relationship-centered approaches to involving families include goal setting discussions and invitations to contribute to current and ongoing school-related topics. It is essential to welcome families into the school environment. The next section will explore the perceptions of parent engagement from the perspective of stakeholder groups.

Stakeholder Perceptions of Parent Engagement

This section of the literature review highlights qualitative research that identifies administrators', teachers', parents', and students' perceptions of parent engagement. This information helps educational leaders and educators better understand the impact stakeholder voices have on their school community.

Research on parent involvement has shown that parents want to be involved beyond conferences. Dauber and Epstein (1991) found parents perceived fewer opportunities for

involvement at the middle school level, and middle-level teachers perceived that parents do not want to be involved. Halsey (2005) conducted a case study to explore the perceptions of teachers, parents, and students regarding parent involvement in the education of middle school students and reported that “all participants in the study agreed that parent involvement was beneficial to student success and positive school-family relations, but teachers, parents, and students faced many obstacles when they went about planning and implementing parent involvement” (p. 59). Teachers’ perceptions and parents’ perceptions differed around an open-door policy invitation. Teachers perceived that they had welcomed parents to visit their classrooms, but parents did not feel comfortable even when they were invited. In this study, Halsey (2005) noted student perceptions of parent involvement were positive. Some seventh-grade students noted that they were more comfortable with parents at extracurricular activities than in classroom activities. Nevertheless, Halsey (2005) found “an increase in parent involvement at the school would create an atmosphere in which it was considered more acceptable and less threatening to have their parents volunteer directly in classrooms” (p. 63). Halsey (2005) further recommended that communication and involvement activities be clarified and strengthened, expectations be defined, and action plans be developed to promote positive shared leadership among stakeholders in the school.

Halsey (2005) concluded that teachers, parents, and students face many obstacles when they attempt to plan and implement activities to engage parents. Evidence from this study showed that middle school principals and teachers failed to communicate with parents, and parents had limited involvement in their student’s academic work beyond signing report cards or monitoring homework (Halsey, 2005). Most parents reported that the school newsletter was not a

factor in the recruitment of their involvement, but the principals perceived it to be a meaningful invitation. One parent used the following analogy to explain his view of the newsletter.

If you met a friend and said to them, let's have lunch sometime, and they would not be sitting down at a restaurant at noon on Friday. A lunch invitation would be specific; you would say when and where. Just saying this event isn't happening doesn't tell parents that teachers want them to be involved. (Halsey, 2005, p. 61).

In conclusion, the research highlights the gap between how schools perceive parent engagement and how parents experience it. While educational leaders and teachers may believe they are creating opportunities for involvement, parents often feel uncertain about their role and unwelcome in school spaces. Studies like those of Dauber and Epstein (1991) and Halsey (2005) emphasize the need for clearer communication, intentional invitations, and more inclusive practices that align with parents' expectations. By understanding the diverse perspectives of administrators, teachers, parents, and students, educators can foster stronger partnerships that promote a shared sense of responsibility for student success. Strengthening these relationships through targeted, meaningful involvement strategies is essential for creating a more engaged and supportive school community.

Principals' Perceptions

Educational leaders play a large role in creating an atmosphere of acceptance for parent involvement (Catsambis, 1998; Lloyd-Smith & Baron, 2010). Too often principals' and parents' perceptions of parent engagement differ, despite the common belief that collaboration is important (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994; Epstein, 1986, 2009; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1975; Lloyd-Smith & Baron, 2010; McGillion Briscoe, 2008; Wright, 2009).

Lloyd-Smith and Baron (2010) studied the attitudes of South Dakota high school principals regarding parent involvement, specifically in terms of communication, competency, collaboration issues, and external factors. Results showed that principals agreed with each category, but “descriptive analysis failed to identify any significant differences when comparing group responses for survey items within the four identified categories” (Lloyd-Smith & Baron, 2010, p. 34). Lloyd-Smith and Baron (2010) also identified attitudinal differences regarding gender, years of experience, professional title, and educational attainment. Data showed that male administrators with post-master’s certifications responded with a higher degree of agreement regarding statements on communication. No differences were found regarding the students’ socioeconomic status or the principals’ years of experience. On an open-ended question where principals were asked to provide input about innovative or successful strategies to generate parent involvement, Lloyd-Smith and Baron (2010) found “less than one third of the respondents offered comments regarding their experiences or best practices, and most comments related to methods of collaboration or communication” (p. 38). However, many participants emphasized the importance of personal invitations to parent-teacher conferences. Some statements suggested incentives to increase parental attendance at school events, such as “gas card giveaways, student bonus points, and food” (Lloyd-Smith & Barron, 2010, p. 38). Other principals reported “serving food has increased our parent/community involvement at parent-teacher conferences and our open houses” (Lloyd-Smith & Baron, 2010, p. 38).

Lloyd-Smith and Baron (2010) suggested further studies be undertaken to explore parent perceptions of school communication and invitations for involvement, as well as “how administrators can implement socially and developmentally acceptable parental involvement programs within their schools” (p. 42). Lloyd-Smith and Baron (2010) confirmed, “Individual

administrators' attitudes differ regarding the concept of parental involvement at the secondary level" (p. 39). Their results suggest while building-level administrators may view parental involvement as desirable, their actions may not support this belief.

Smith (2011) examined principals' perceptions of parent collaboration in a school improvement process as evidenced in five high school accreditation self-studies and visiting team reports in Utah. Smith (2011) concluded that parent roles in the schools were still very traditional, and parents were not involved in school decision making. Smith (2011) noted, "No school leader provided evidence that parents were involved in meaningful decision-making" (p. 94). Parents were deemed important in a student's life, but not in the life of the school. As a result of this study, Utah mandated a parental engagement requirement for school improvement. Smith (2011) created a statewide project, Teaming Together, to help district leaders collaborate with stakeholders in non-traditional ways to make effective school decisions. Smith (2011) encouraged researchers across the country to implement this project and identify specific strategies for educational leaders. Recommendations also included "surveying parents statewide as to their desire to participate in school improvement processes in an attempt to identify roadblocks to parent participation" (Smith, 2011, p. 153).

Sanchez's (2012) research on high-achieving public schools in California found principals believed that "the role of formal and informal parent groups on their school campus was to support the school" (p. 124). Beyond booster club participation, 10 out of 12 principals engaged a school site council and/or parent teacher school association in decision making for school improvement (Sanchez, 2012). Respondents in this study believed that the principal's perception was an important part of this success in the school community.

Teachers' Perceptions

Teachers in rural middle school settings recognize family engagement as crucial for several reasons. First, they believe it enhances student academic achievement and overall development. Actively involved parents can provide essential support, monitor progress, and reinforce learning at home, which complements classroom instruction (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Second, teachers value the positive impact of family engagement on the school's sense of community and collaborative efforts. In rural areas, close partnerships between school, families, and the community create a supportive environment that benefits students (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994). Lastly, teachers view family engagement as a means to address specific challenges faced in rural areas, such as limited access to resources and services. Engaged families can provide additional resources and support, helping to bridge gaps and promote student success (Epstein, 2018).

Parents' Perceptions

Parents in rural settings at the middle school level perceive family engagement as crucial for various reasons. Firstly, they believe it enhances their children's academic success and overall development. Actively involved parents feel they can provide crucial academic support, monitor progress, and reinforce learning at home (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Secondly, parents in rural areas value the sense of community and support that comes from being engaged in their child's education. They appreciate the close-knit environment and collaborative efforts between the school, families, and the community (Fowler et al., 2009). Lastly, parents view family engagement as addressing specific challenges faced in rural areas, such as limited access to resources and services, ensuring their children have the necessary support to thrive academically (Cox & Robinson, 2007).

Students' Perceptions

Students in rural middle school settings perceive family engagement as vital for their academic success and overall well-being. They appreciate the support and encouragement they receive from engaged parents, which helps them stay motivated and focused on their studies (Boonk et al., 2018). Next, students value the sense of belonging and connectedness that comes from having their families actively involved in their education. This fosters a positive school environment and enhances their overall school experience (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Lastly, students recognize that family engagement helps address specific challenges faced in rural areas, such as limited access to resources and services. Having their families involved ensures they have the necessary support to excel academically (Epstein, 2018).

This literature review has established the history of family engagement as well as the context of parental and traditional family involvement. The world experienced radical change as the COVID-19 pandemic engulfed and impacted school district agendas. Understanding the national and state-level stories of family engagement through the pandemic gives necessary consideration of how it ever changed the landscape and interactions of schools and families forever and how these experiences shape the future.

Family Engagement through the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all students; however, its impact has been particularly devastating for students of color, students from low-income families, English learners, and other marginalized children and youth (Myung et al, 2021). The 2021–22 school year, therefore, constituted a critical opportunity for schools to offer students, families, and educators a restorative restart. This moment in history provided districts and schools an

opportunity to reimagine and rebuild equitable school systems where all students experience the support and family involvement they need to thrive (Myung et al, 2021).

Another asset that has developed post pandemic has been increased family partnership in student learning with schooling happening in more meaningful and consistent ways at home. Because of necessity, families have had a clearer window into the core components of teaching and learning, and teachers have had the opportunity to see families more readily as valuable partners in this learning. More than two thirds of parents surveyed in April–May 2020 agreed with the statement, “I am more connected with my child’s day-to-day education now than ever before” (Learning Heroes, 2020, p. 13). Most educators and school leaders seemed to appreciate this increased family engagement. In a national survey of educators, administrators, and family engagement leaders, 94% agreed with the statement, “The role families play in their children’s success is now more important than ever”; and 74% agreed with the statement, “The COVID-19 crisis has helped me better appreciate the important role families play in at-home learning” (National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement, 2020, p. 3). Schools can continue to strengthen this parental connection to school to deepen and sustain important parental engagement in student learning and success. Research has shown that parent involvement is significantly related to better outcomes for students and the quality of the student–teacher relationship (Topor et al., 2010).

Decades of research have established that family–school partnerships are essential to student learning and school improvement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Henderson & Mapp, 2002), yet most schools have treated parent engagement as an extraneous service or communications task, not one that is immediately relevant to the main goal of teaching and learning. With the closure of schools during the global pandemic, families were more widely regarded as essential

school partners (National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement, 2020). In response, schools were challenged to work quickly and holistically to support families in creating safe and effective learning spaces for students. Early evidence has shown that in schools where teachers were supported to develop partnerships with individual families, positive outcomes to the COVID-19 crisis were the result (Liu & Helo-Villegas, 2020). Teachers and school staff were able to establish connections with families, assess their learning and basic service needs, and provide necessary guidance and resources to support distance learning and other challenges.

An essential first step towards building strong connections between schools and families is to connect proactively with each family. Specifically, teachers and school leaders should be supported to reestablish individual, personalized connections with students and their families so that they feel known and valued as well as have access to trusted school-based resources for support and guidance. Engaging students and families are especially important as schools design and implement programs to address learning gaps as students returned to school post-pandemic. Recent research on engaging families to support student learning suggests that without addressing underlying issues of power, trust, racial bias, and lack of cultural competency, the approaches that characterize many school-based efforts to engage families can foster disengagement and resistance (Ishimaru, 2019). This is especially true among families of color, which can exacerbate racial and other inequities in education (Ishimaru, 2019).

The purpose of explicit parent–teacher home connections is to strengthen (and sometimes repair) the relationship between school and home. To form positive and proactive connections and active partnerships between teachers and families, schools need to focus on establishing “systemic respect.” In their work with families in schools, practitioners at Seneca Family of

Agencies make focused efforts to ensure that parents and guardians hear and feel that they matter, are valued, and are appreciated. According to Detterman, this “mattering” includes the following:

Attention: Teachers notice when parents and guardians are present and available for their students, either virtually or in person. Similarly, parents and guardians notice when teachers are available and accessible to recognize the assets and needs of their children.

Appreciation: Teachers value the little and big efforts that parents and guardians make to support student learning. Parents and guardians understand and appreciate the commitment of teachers to their child’s success.

Importance: Teachers recognize student and family circumstances and attend to their well-being as central to an effective teaching–learning strategy (Detterman et al., 2019, pp. 48–49).

According to Bozkurt, family engagement is crucial at both the national and state levels, particularly given the transformative impact of the pandemic on educational landscapes for several reasons:

1. Enhancing Educational Outcomes: Engaged families play a significant role in supporting their children's learning. When families are actively involved in their child's education, it has a positive impact on academic achievement, leading to better educational outcomes at both the national and state levels.
2. Reducing Achievement Gaps: Family engagement is a powerful tool in narrowing achievement gaps. It helps ensure that all students, regardless of their background or

circumstances, have access to the necessary resources and support systems for success in their education.

3. **Promoting Equity and Inclusion:** By actively involving families, educational institutions demonstrate a commitment to inclusivity and equity. This helps create a more level playing field for students from diverse backgrounds and ensures that their unique needs and perspectives are considered.
4. **Informing Policy and Decision-Making:** Family engagement provides valuable insights and feedback for policymakers at the national and state levels. It helps them understand the on-the-ground realities of education and make informed decisions that benefit all students.
5. **Increasing Accountability and Transparency:** When families are engaged, it holds educational institutions accountable for the quality of education provided. It encourages transparency in decision-making processes and ensures that parents have a voice in shaping education policies.
6. **Strengthening Community Relationships:** Family engagement fosters a sense of community within schools and educational systems. It builds trust and positive relationships between families, educators, and policymakers, creating a supportive network focused on the best interests of the child.
7. **Supporting Social and Emotional Development:** Engaged families contribute to a nurturing environment that supports not only academic growth but also the social and emotional development of students. This holistic approach is crucial for their overall well-being.

8. Empowering Parents as Advocates: When parents are engaged, they become informed advocates for their children's education. This empowers them to actively participate in discussions about policy changes, funding allocation, and educational initiatives at both the national and state levels.
9. Fostering a Lifelong Love of Learning: Family engagement sets the stage for a lifelong appreciation of education. When parents value and prioritize learning, it sends a powerful message to their children about the importance of education beyond formal schooling.
10. Building a Stronger Nation: Ultimately, a well-educated populace benefits the nation. Engaged families contribute to a culture that values education, leading to a more informed, skilled, and productive workforce, which is essential for national prosperity and progress (Bozkurt et al., 2020 pp. 95–100).

In summary, especially in the wake of the pandemic, family engagement stands as a crucial factor at both national and state levels. Its significance extends beyond bolstering the individual success of students to encompass fortifying the resilience and effectiveness of the education system and the broader national fabric.

With the context of family engagement at the national level, it is also important to explore the implications of the pandemic at the state level. The year 2020 was arguably a year like no other, for schools all over the world. In particular, the early phase of the pandemic and first wave lockdowns March-July 2020 caused radical and perhaps long-lasting changes to learning and teaching. By mid-March, governments in 113 countries had closed educational institutions. Over 100 countries had implemented nationwide closures, impacting nearly 850 million children and youth (Barrington, 2022). According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), by the end of March 2020, more than 1.5

billion pupils or 87% of the world's student population across 165 countries had been affected by school closures caused by COVID-19 (Sacks et al., 2020). One year into the COVID-19 pandemic, close to half the world's students were still affected by partial or full school closures, and over 100 million additional children had fallen below the minimum proficiency level in reading because of the health crisis (Barrington, 2022).

Though major metropolitan cities first became the focal point of the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States, the virus spread to every state and inhabited county. In per capita terms, cumulative COVID-19 cases were greater in metro than in non-metro (rural) areas until late October 2020, when cumulative per capita COVID-19 cases in rural areas exceeded cases in metro areas. By mid-April 2021, the prevalence of cumulative COVID-19 cases was very similar in metro and non-metro areas (Pender, 2021). Soon after the call for school closures, U.S. educational leaders faced numerous challenges, including parents with questions about remote and online learning opportunities; effects of school closures on student attendance requirements, assessment practices and student report cards; and graduation requirements for seniors in high school (Barrington, 2022). Principals soon became the caregivers of all (Anderson et al., 2020). Leading in a crisis became the new normal as school leaders confronted pressing issues of instructional responses; challenges for students, families, and teachers; policies for crisis management; inequities exposed by the pandemic; and strategies for self-care and well-being of others (Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE), 2020). Reporting on a CPRE study of 120 principals' COVID-19 experiences in 19 states, Superville (2020) noted: The in-the-moment research revealed glaring inequities and varied district approaches. Some gave principals broad autonomy to make decisions related to the pandemic response, while others took

a top-down centralized approach that constrained school leaders. Others balanced the two approaches.

In the mid-western state pertaining to this study, a top state administrator held weekly and sometimes daily virtual meetings with school district superintendents with the purpose of bringing them up to date on policy items such as masking requirements and crisis response. Other organizations partnered with this mid-western state's department of education to provide training sessions on how to pivot to online learning along with continued support on navigating specific situations and strategically thinking through next steps.

In efforts to support ongoing challenges faced by local school districts, state and school district leaders navigated unknown territory at every step. Leadership was difficult and universal agreement on what was going to happen next was nonexistent. Increasing evidence of trauma-related symptoms exhibited by school personnel, and particularly, students and families became paramount as the model for delivering education shifted quickly and unpredictably. Long-term sustainability of on-line learning for students, parents, and teachers seemed impossible as inconsistency in attendance and type of instruction produced extreme anxiety with unknown consequences (Pender, 2021).

As the global pandemic extended into fall 2021, going back to school in a more normal environment became less of a possibility and stress and anxiety among leaders, teachers, students, and families reared on. In light of these challenges, the importance of strong family engagement in the educational process has never been more evident. Collaborative efforts between parents, teachers, and school leaders were essential in navigating this evolving landscape. The next section will delve into the pivotal role that family involvement plays in supporting student success and well-being during these unprecedented times.

Reframing Family Involvement

As schools continued to find new ways to involve families in their children's learning during the school day, the global pandemic interrupted school as most students, parents, teachers, and leaders knew it. Prior to COVID, schools had open door experiences and events to support relationship building with families and encouraging participation in the classroom through a variety of experiences. As the pandemic altered every aspect of school in what seemed as overnight, families became the bridge between home and school, delivering and supporting instruction, communicating with teachers, and assisting students in homework completion (Treviño et al., 2021). Parents and families became a critical link to alternative methods of instructional learning as students stayed at home and virtual environments became the new norm. Many educators found creative ways to include families in the learning process while school doors were closed, and learning was placed in the hands of family members (Carrion-Martinez et al., 2021). Teachers relied on families to supply technology support, materials, and additional time assisting with completion of schoolwork. Many teachers took the time to communicate even more often with families, showing appreciation for the work being done at home as well as offering support and understanding for what families were going through (Paul, 2020). Further, families were able to have a window to classroom learning by participating in virtual class instruction and working with online resources and educational platforms firsthand. Parents also found themselves increasingly appreciative of teachers and understanding the teacher's role in their child's education.

Post pandemic research has revealed an increase in family involvement and overall communication between parents and teachers (Klein, 2021). Schools were able to see the benefit of increased communication with families as well as opportunities to engage with families

through meaningful interactions. Rather than whole class reporting, and generic curriculum maps being shared with families weekly or monthly to show progress or planning, there was a shift in focus as communication and including families in focused conversations regarding their child's individual learning increased (Klein, 2021). Family involvement was able to transform into truly reciprocal engagement and relationship building opportunities due to a forced need to include families in new and more relevant ways as they navigated challenges. In particular relevance to this study, is the noted differences and impact of COVID-19 on rural school environments. The next section will address important perspectives in the rural education context pre and post pandemic.

Family Engagement in Rural Settings

Family engagement in rural school contexts is unique and particular to specific variables both pre and post pandemic. Important considerations in rural school settings include transportation, technology access, funding, mental health resources, personnel, policy, and educational programming.

Transportation is fundamental in rural education. Transportation challenges are often magnified with fewer students spread across wide areas. First, transportation overcomes the geographical challenges that can hinder students' ability to attend school regularly. In rural areas, where public transportation options are limited, school buses serve as a lifeline, providing a reliable means of transportation for students (Cohen-Vogel et al., 2015). This ensures that students can engage with their education consistently. Secondly, transportation helps address issues of equity and access. Without reliable transportation, some students may face significant barriers in attending school. This can lead to absenteeism, which has detrimental effects on academic performance and overall educational outcomes (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014). By

providing transportation services, schools in rural areas level the playing field, ensuring that all students, regardless of their proximity to the school, have equal access to educational opportunities. Additionally, reliable transportation not only ensures consistent student attendance, but also plays a pivotal role in promoting family engagement, as it eases logistical challenges for parents in rural areas, enabling them to actively participate in school-related activities, meetings, and events, fostering a stronger connection between home and school.

In rural settings, transportation is not merely a logistical consideration; it is a cornerstone of educational access and equity. By providing reliable transportation options, schools ensure that every student has the opportunity to engage with their education, regardless of their geographical location. Recognizing the critical role of transportation is essential for fostering a supportive learning environment in rural communities.

Technology access is a cornerstone of modern education, enabling digital learning, research, and communication. In rural areas, however, students often face challenges such as limited broadband access and the affordability of devices (Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010). Ensuring equitable access to technology is crucial for enabling rural students and their families to participate fully in the digital learning environment. One key aspect of technology access is its potential to level the playing field. By providing students in rural areas with the necessary tools and resources, schools can bridge the digital divide and ensure that all students have equal opportunities to engage with educational content and resources (Hew & Brush, 2007). This is particularly important in an era where technological proficiency is increasingly vital for academic and professional success and used as a key communication tool by parents.

Moreover, technology access in rural education opens new avenues for learning and expands the horizons of educational possibilities. It enables students to explore virtual field trips,

engage in collaborative projects with peers from around the world, and access a wealth of online resources and educational platforms (Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010). This not only enhances the quality of education but also fosters a culture of curiosity and lifelong learning. In rural settings, technology access is not merely a convenience; it is a critical enabler of educational equity and innovation for students and families. By ensuring that students and families have access to necessary technology and resources, schools empower them to thrive in a digital age. Recognizing the significance of technology access is essential for creating a vibrant and inclusive educational environment in rural communities. In addition to transportation and technology access, funding, mental health resources, personnel, policy, and educational programming are critical components that shape the educational landscape in rural communities. Adequate funding is necessary to sustain these essential resources, while mental health services and sufficient staffing ensure that students' emotional and academic needs are met. Furthermore, policies that are tailored to rural contexts and innovative educational programming can help schools navigate the unique challenges they face, ultimately fostering a more equitable and enriching learning environment for all students and their families.

Family Engagement Resources and Educational Practices

Research studies point to the need for additional comprehensive and strategic approaches to bringing parents and families into partnerships with schools. The ultimate outcome of these efforts is increased student achievement. Requirements for family engagement are found in almost all federal and state education statutes and regulations. The 2002 ESEA defines parent involvement as “the participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities; including ensuring that parents

play an integral role in assisting their child’s learning” (No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, 2002).

In 1997, the Harvard Family Research Project developed policy and practice recommendations to elevate the preparation of teachers in family involvement and authored the brief “New Skills for New Schools: Preparing Teachers in Family Involvement” (Shartrand et. al, 1997). Since the publication of this guidance, the education reform landscape has changed dramatically, making it necessary to align teacher preparation and professional learning for family engagement with the goals of a twenty-first century education. Today’s education policies focus on providing children and youth with the knowledge and skills necessary to participate in a global economy. Standards for student knowledge and skills are aligned from early childhood through college and beyond. Education reforms value innovation, systemic approaches, and the use of data for decision making, continuous improvement, and accountability. These changes are influencing the family engagement field to move away from “random acts” of family engagement—i.e., the proliferation of numerous programs and activities that are disconnected from instructional practice and school reform efforts. Instead, policymakers, researchers, and practitioners are advocating for systemic and integrated approaches to family engagement that have an impact on student achievement and school performance (Weiss et al., 2010). Preparation and implementation of meaningful family engagement must be designed in a systemic way to include standards, curriculum, collaboration, ongoing professional learning, and evaluation for learning and continuous improvement.

In the midwestern state where this study was conducted, a parent information resource center works in a variety of ways to promote parent engagement in schools and early childhood and education programs. This parent resource center, founded as a non-profit agency in 2006,

following national level funding support, operates with funding from the state's department of education technical support resources. In addition to an annual parent engagement conference for parents and professionals, this resource center provides technical assistance to schools on effective parent engagement and resources to higher education programs to help them prepare future teachers to use effective parent engagement methods (Weiss et al., 2010). To respond to current day issues, this resource center provides training to educators and leadership teams in the state's lowest performing schools and helps these schools develop family engagement action plans based on state performance indicators. These performance indicators include a focus on supporting rural schools and regular communication with parents about what they can do at home to support their children's learning.

The parent resource center in this mid-western state promotes meaningful family engagement at all levels of education and provides information and resources to help parents, educators, and other organizations promote the educational success of every child. The parent resource center supports school districts by developing resources to promote family-school-community partnerships, offering professional learning to educators to engage families in their children's learning, and providing technical assistance to educators on the development of family friendly policies and programs. Additionally, the resource center supports families by developing resources for families to support their children's learning at home, building the capacity of parents to become involved in their children's education, developing parent advocacy and leadership skills, and ensuring that families receive literacy training and resources to support their children's academic achievement. Lastly, the resource center supports rural communities by networking with community organizations to support family engagement in education and supporting early learning programs to promote school readiness.

Family engagement is one of the most powerful predictors of social-emotional development, educational attainment, and success in school and life for children and youth (Global Family Research Project, 2018). With this in mind, the development of a family engagement framework (Kansas Parent Information Resource Center (K.P.I.R.C), 2023) was developed by the parent resource center as a technical assistance project with numerous state and national partnerships. This collaborative effort combining research and best practice provides guidance for families, practitioners, community members, and educators to examine current family engagement practices and plan future strategies to engage families in the development and learning of their children and youth.

This framework includes a shared definition for family engagement, standards for family engagement birth through grade 12, and guidance for what best practice standards look like in action. A first step in developing this framework was to create a common definition of family engagement for the state, including representative voices at state, local schools/districts, educators, practitioners, families, and community levels. Having thoroughly examined research findings and incorporating best practices, a collaborative effort led to the formulation of a unified definition. According to a parent advisory council, family engagement is described as an empowering partnership involving families, educators, practitioners, and the community, all sharing the responsibility for the individual success of children and youth. This collaborative approach emphasizes the cultivation and maintenance of active, equitable, and respectful relationships among families, educators, practitioners, and the community, all dedicated to supporting the educational and social-emotional development of children and youth.

Family engagement is a key aspect of the Multi-Tier Systems of Support (MTSS) (Kansas Multi-Tiered Systems of Support and Alignment, 2023). For this reason, schools must

make a concerted effort to involve families as early as possible. Within the MTSS framework, an empowering culture is a key component that supports the effective instruction of students. Parents and families should be involved in the education of their child from the beginning as a school creates an empowering culture to support implementation of MTSS. Families need information on how MTSS will impact their child. This includes understanding what data will be collected, how it will be used, and what support will be provided. Moreover, involving families at the outset ensures that they are active partners in the MTSS process. This collaborative approach not only fosters a sense of ownership and shared responsibility, but also enables parents to provide valuable insights into their student's unique strengths and needs. By equipping families with a clear understanding of how MTSS operates, including data collection and the tailored support available, schools can build a foundation of trust and open communication. This proactive engagement ultimately lays the groundwork for a more effective and supportive educational experience for every child involved and highlights the engagement of families in meaningful educational conversations and goals.

Shared responsibility in educational practices means that families, educators, practitioners, and the community collaborate and communicate to promote positive educational outcomes for children and youth. The personal success of children and youth is at the heart of the educational resources and practices outlined in this section.

Family Engagement and Post-Pandemic Funding

Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) has been provided to support school districts in addressing the challenges of the global pandemic in several phases over the last two years. These federal grant initiatives have included opportunities for school leaders to respond to family engagement as a part of response and recovery. ESSER, I funding

came out of a \$13.2 billion appropriation within the \$2 trillion stimulus bill enacted in spring 2020 by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES). The goal of the CARES legislation was to blunt the economic downturn from shutdowns brought on by the global pandemic (Hew & Brush, 2007). Local school districts used ESSER I funding mostly to purchase technology for remote instruction and cleaning supplies for stepped-up sanitation efforts to slow the spread of the virus. Access to technology was a critical equity issue for students and families in rural areas as well as in addressing needs related to poverty (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

The first round of legislation was followed in December 2020 by the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act which allocated \$53.4 billion in ESSER II funds to school systems nationwide. The goal of the second round of funding was to help schools cope with the challenge of a hybrid instructional model that alternated in-person classroom instruction with virtual/remote lessons. Students and families were constantly challenged to attend, engage, and respond to quickly shifting instructional models and to understand the new role and responsibility of the parent in virtual/remote instruction (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Finally, on March 11, 2021, the federal government enacted the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act that provided states with \$4.5 billion in direct emergency funding to public and charter schools to support the long-term work of economic recovery. This became ESSER III, the most recent round of relief funds (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). The ARP Act Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER III) provided federal relief funds to states and school districts to help safely reopen and sustain the safe operation of schools and to address the impact COVID-19 had on students. The global pandemic had unprecedented

and far-reaching impacts on PK-12 learning. The pandemic widened preexisting achievement gaps, deepened divides in educational opportunities, and created emotional and mental health concerns for students and staff (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). The extent and impact of these issues on family engagement has been extensive, leaving schools with the challenge and opportunity to think about what has been learned and to re-think long-standing practices.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.) provides four classifications of school district settings - city, suburban, towns, and rural to analyze the spending plans of nearly 2,500 school districts and charter organizations educating some 53% of the nation's public-school students. The information company Burbio collected local agencies' plans, which represent about \$60 billion of the \$122 billion in the third round of federal ESSER III funding in response to the global pandemic (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Staffing has emerged as a pandemic priority for local leaders nationally. Regardless of classification, more than half of all school districts and charter entities in the sample intended to spend relief funds on hiring and paying teachers and academic staff, and about 40% in each category expected to invest in teacher training. Similarly, at least half the local education agencies in every category planned to invest ESSER III funds in summer learning and upgrading ventilation systems. Beyond those areas, priorities diverged (Allen et al., 2020). At a time when students needed help with academic recovery, spending on ventilation or transportation may seem beside the point. While some policy experts warned local education agencies against spending pandemic-related federal aid on new staff or salary increases that would be hard to sustain when funding expires in 2024, spending on short-term mental-health support or staff to

reach out to students who have stopped attending school during the pandemic and reconnecting with families also warranted attention to address critical concerns (Sobti et al., 2023).

Adequate funding is the lifeblood of any educational system. In rural areas, the smaller tax base can make it more challenging to generate revenue for education. Sufficient funding is essential to provide quality education, maintain facilities, and address the unique needs of rural students and families (Sobti et al., 2023). Ultimately, policymakers need to know how—and how effectively—the federal pandemic relief money ends up being spent. Understanding how local education authorities in different demographic settings spent a substantial percentage of the federal K-12 pandemic aid reveals differing priorities of local agencies.

One key aspect of funding in rural education is its impact on the recruitment and retention of skilled educators. In rural areas, attracting qualified teachers and staff can be challenging due to factors like lower salaries and limited professional development opportunities (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). However, investing in the recruitment and retention of skilled educators is crucial for providing quality education in rural settings.

Moreover, funding plays a significant role in fostering family engagement practices within rural education. Adequate funding allows schools to allocate resources to initiatives that bridge the gap between families and educational institutions. This could involve organizing family-oriented events, facilitating workshops for parents on supporting their children's education, and establishing communication channels that encourage parental involvement (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

Investments in family engagement initiatives, made possible through appropriate funding, contribute profoundly to the educational landscape in rural areas. These programs create opportunities for parents to actively participate in their children's education, fostering a stronger

partnership between home and school. Additionally, they empower families with the knowledge and tools to support their children's academic journey effectively (Allen et al., 2020).

Moreover, funding enables schools in rural areas to implement targeted interventions and programs that address the unique needs of their students. This may include initiatives to improve technology access, expand extracurricular activities, or provide specialized support services. These investments directly contribute to enhancing the overall educational experience and ensuring that students in rural areas have access to the same opportunities as their urban counterparts (Kuhfeld et al, 2020).

In rural settings, funding is not merely a financial consideration; it is a critical determinant of educational access and excellence. By providing the necessary financial resources, schools empower educators to create a vibrant and enriching learning environment that actively involves families and nurtures the potential of students in rural communities (Kuhfeld et al, 2020).

Access to mental health resources is a crucial component not only for the holistic education of students but also for fostering the overall well-being of families in rural settings. In areas where services may be limited, the availability of mental health resources becomes even more critical. These resources encompass various services, including counseling, therapy, and access to trained professionals, which are vital for addressing the emotional and psychological well-being of students and supporting families navigating these challenges. Unfortunately, in rural areas, the availability of these resources may be limited due to factors such as fewer mental health professionals and facilities (Bryan, Bryan et al., 2018). However, addressing mental health issues is imperative for student success and the overall well-being of families, highlighting the need for increased access to and investment in mental health services in rural communities.

One key aspect of mental health resources in rural education is their role in creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment. When students have access to mental health services within the educational setting, they are more likely to feel safe, valued, and understood. This, in turn, fosters a positive school climate conducive to learning and personal growth and creates a culture that is welcoming to parents (Farmer et al., 2018). Moreover, mental health resources play a crucial role in early intervention and prevention. By identifying and addressing mental health concerns early on, schools can help students develop coping skills, resilience, and a positive self-image (Bryan, Gayed, et al., 2018). This proactive approach not only supports the immediate well-being of students but also equips students and families alike with lifelong skills for navigating challenges. In rural settings, mental health resources are not merely an auxiliary service; they are a critical component important to the family unit. By providing access to mental health services, schools contribute to the overall well-being and development of students and offer critical support to families. Recognizing the significance of mental health resources is essential for creating a nurturing and supportive educational environment in rural communities (Bryan, Gayed, et al., 2018).

Qualified and dedicated personnel are the bedrock of any educational system. In rural settings, where unique challenges often exist, having a skilled and committed team of educators and staff becomes even more critical. Personnel resources encompass a wide range of roles, including teachers, administrators, support staff, and specialists. In rural areas, attracting and retaining qualified teachers and staff can be challenging due to factors such as lower salaries and limited professional development opportunities (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). However, investing in the recruitment and retention of skilled educators is crucial for providing quality education in rural settings and establishing important connections with families.

One key aspect of personnel resources is their impact on the learning environment. Skilled educators possess the expertise and knowledge to engage students effectively, tailor instruction to individual needs, create a positive and stimulating classroom atmosphere, and engage in meaningful communication with parents. Moreover, a dedicated support staff plays a vital role in ensuring that the school functions smoothly, from administrative tasks to maintenance and custodial services. Personnel resources contribute to the sense of community within the school. In rural settings, where schools often serve as central hubs for the community, having a committed and passionate team of educators and staff fosters a culture of collaboration, trust, and shared goals (Kuhlfeld et al., 2020). This, in turn, strengthens the overall educational experience for students and families (Fowler & Walberg, 1991). In rural settings, personnel resources are not merely positions to be filled; they are the heart and soul of the educational system.

Policy serves as the framework that shapes the direction and priorities of education. In rural settings, where unique challenges and opportunities exist, well-crafted and responsive policies become even more critical. Education policy encompasses a range of decisions and directives, including those related to curriculum, funding, assessment, and governance. In rural areas, where demographics, resources, and needs may differ from urban counterparts, tailored policies are essential to address specific challenges (Layton et al., 2006). These policies provide the guidance needed to allocate resources effectively, create an environment conducive to learning, and strengthen family engagement in the school district.

One key aspect of policy in rural education is its impact on resource allocation. Policies that recognize and address the unique needs of rural schools can lead to targeted funding, professional development opportunities, and rich opportunities for family engagement and the

broader community (Johnson, 2017). This ensures that schools in rural areas have the resources and tools necessary to provide quality education (Parker et al., 2018). Policy plays a pivotal role in promoting family engagement and collaboration. In rural settings, well-designed policies can facilitate partnerships between schools, families, and local organizations, leveraging collective resources and expertise to support student success (Back, 2020). In rural settings, policy is not a bureaucratic formality; it is a catalyst for progress and equity. Well-informed and responsive policies empower educators, parents and families, and students to navigate the unique challenges and opportunities of rural education.

Educational programming serves as the backbone of any effective education system. In rural settings, where unique challenges and opportunities often exist, tailored and innovative educational programs become even more critical. Educational programming encompasses a wide range of initiatives, including curriculum design, instructional strategies, extracurricular activities, and specialized interventions. In rural areas, high quality educational programs are essential to address specific challenges (Howley, 2002). These programs provide the structure and resources needed to ensure that students receive a well-rounded and comprehensive education. One key aspect of educational programming in rural education is its capacity to cater to diverse learning needs. Rural students may have unique interests, aspirations, and learning styles that require tailored approaches. Well-crafted programs can offer a variety of learning pathways, including vocational education, online courses, and experiential learning opportunities, allowing students to pursue their passions and prepare for future endeavors beyond the geographic isolation of the rural setting.

Additionally, educational programming can serve as a catalyst for family engagement and community collaboration. In rural settings, schools are central to community life. By offering

programs that involve families, local organizations, and businesses, schools can leverage collective resources and expertise to enhance educational and family experiences (Dibbon, 2017). Educational programming is not a mere collection of courses; it is a blueprint for empowerment and growth for rural students. Thoughtfully designed and responsive programs provide students with the tools and opportunities needed to succeed in a rapidly changing and global world.

Family engagement in rural school contexts presents distinctive challenges and opportunities, particularly in light of various variables that have been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. In rural settings, specific factors such as transportation, technology access, funding, mental health resources, personnel, policy, and educational programming play critical roles in shaping the overall educational experience for students and families. Each of these components requires careful consideration and targeted strategies to ensure that family engagement remains effective and inclusive in rural school environments.

Current Issues in Family Engagement

As schools move forward from the global pandemic, exploring and unleashing the power of technology to meet the needs of students must be embraced. The power held by technologically savvy students and new-found strategies to engage students in relevant learning by classroom teachers must be incorporated (Kaloeti & Manalu, 2021). Teachers can build on proven strategies such as flipped classrooms to strengthen instruction and engagement (Ash, 2012; Schmidt & Ralph, 2016). Inadvertently, many teachers used flipped classrooms during COVID-19 allowing students to review materials at their own pace with support, such as videos. Teachers can develop new technology-based approaches to instruction, respecting age-appropriate practices and selection of cultural and developmentally appropriate technology for

their students. Allowing students to show their learning using technology, particularly social media, can also improve engagement. For example, many young people have turned to social media outlets such as TikTok and YouTube to express themselves and participate in conversations around pop culture, politics, and activism (Nam, 2020). Utilizing the skills associated with content creation, students can engage with each other, open dialogue, and be assessed using these platforms to share their content knowledge. Integrating technology requires intentionality and education about the safe use of technology while tapping into the skills and interests of students.

In addition to leveraging technology, fostering strong family engagement is crucial in maximizing the effectiveness of modern educational approaches. As schools navigate the post-pandemic landscape, involving families in their children's learning journey becomes paramount. Research consistently highlights the positive impact of family involvement on student outcomes, including academic achievement, attendance, and socio-emotional development (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). By actively involving parents and guardians in their children's education, educators can create a collaborative learning environment that extends beyond the classroom walls. This partnership between schools and families not only provides additional support for students but also helps to reinforce the relevance and applicability of technology-driven learning strategies in the context of their individual experiences and home environments. In this way, family engagement acts as a powerful catalyst in bridging the gap between classroom instruction and real-world application, ultimately enhancing the overall educational experience for students.

The COVID-19 pandemic often left teachers and their students feeling lonely and socially isolated, thereby causing feelings of anxiety and depression (Blackmon, 2021). In addition, Black and Brown families and communities were also left facing increased racial trauma and

mental health issues in part from efforts to dismantle systemic racism (Horsford et al., 2021). The toll of navigating racism alongside the unknowns of COVID-19 weighs heavily on one's social well-being. For a hard re-set to "treat" and "heal" social health, there is a need to validate the experienced struggles and present healthy models of social well-being situated in sociopolitical contexts.

Family engagement becomes even more crucial in the wake of such challenging circumstances. It serves as a vital support system that can help alleviate the feelings of loneliness and isolation experienced by teachers and students during the global pandemic. By actively involving families in the educational process, a sense of connection and belonging is reinforced, which can counteract the negative impacts of social isolation. Additionally, acknowledging and addressing the increased racial trauma faced by Black and Brown families is essential for their overall well-being. Family engagement provides a platform for open conversations about these experiences, fostering understanding and empathy within the family unit. Together, schools and families can work towards creating a nurturing environment that acknowledges and validates these struggles while also promoting mental and emotional health. This collective effort not only aids in healing and recovery but also sets a positive example of social well-being within the broader sociopolitical context.

A great contributor to social well-being is a sense of connectivity where individuals can share and lean on one another for guidance and support. While teachers and students turned to technology to stay connected, pervasive challenges with limited technology and unreliable internet made connectivity challenging and, in many cases, near impossible during transitions to remote learning. Recognizing research on the digital disparities of the digital divide (Dolan, 2016; Fulton & Sibley, 2003; Gorski, 2005; Moldavan et al., 2022; Puigjaner, 2016) has not only

shown the gap in access to digital resources and the knowledge to use such resources but also the need for advocacy initiatives to prioritize digital equity to reduce such gaps. Teachers and students from Black and Brown communities disproportionately face the societal impacts of the digital divide with limited physical access to materials (e.g., computer hardware, software, internet) and the social access of using such resources to participate in learning (Gorski, 2005). While there are obvious implications of digital disparities on academic success (Dolan, 2016), teachers must navigate the impact of digital privilege on vulnerable and marginalized students as well as problematize solutions to empower students and families with the resources necessary to achieve.

Moreover, the proliferation of new technology, coupled with the constraints of time and training, poses a significant challenge for educators already contending with packed schedules. This prompts a crucial inquiry: how can intentional space be carved out to accommodate these burgeoning demands? This is especially pertinent during periods of social isolation, where the need for a supportive community becomes even more pronounced (Carillo & Flores, 2020; Passey, 2021). Addressing this issue is imperative for educators to adeptly navigate the evolving educational landscape and provide optimal support for their students and families. Support from family and community involvement may be one solution, especially since remote learning taught us that there needs to be a central role in sharing teaching and learning responsibilities with the cooperation and involvement of families (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Thus, teachers may need to rethink traditional school hours, thereby extending learning communities to families during evening and weekend hours to encourage family engagement. Furthermore, space for critical dialogue among teachers and families must be made for recognizing experiences of digital disparities to ensure all students can best be supported.

Despite challenges, family engagement in the technology world is crucial. It helps bridge the generational digital divide. As technology advances at a rapid pace, younger generations often adapt quickly, while older generations find it more challenging to keep up. When families engage with technology together, it provides an opportunity for shared learning experiences. Parents or older family members can learn from the digital fluency of younger members, while the latter can benefit from the wisdom and life experience of their elders. This opportunity for mutual learning between families and the school also fosters a sense of unity and understanding, creating a supportive environment for everyone to navigate the ever-changing technological landscape.

An Educational Platform of Promise

During the global pandemic, family engagement was often an area where the right decision for some families was the wrong decision for others. The polarized nature of families' sentiments made it important for school systems to explore approaches to family engagement at a more granular level. In response to this need, a middle school in a rural school district decided to take a different approach. The decision was made to implement an educational platform, MyEducation Data (Trenholm & White, 2016). The MyEducation Data platform supports data-based decision making with real time data. This customized dashboard aims to change conversations, change mindsets, and change actions to ultimately change outcomes. The platform focuses on data for each individual student in the areas of behavior, attendance, enrollment, and grades to provide a more comprehensive picture of the student. The student profile report captures all data on one page to allow school leaders and teachers to converse with a parent utilizing up-to-date, real-time information. Timely access to this information allows school personnel to lead productive conversations that highlight the strengths and needs of each student.

This approach allows adults to see a full picture of a student and change the approach for a successful discussion and plan of support. This innovative approach not only acknowledges the diverse perspectives and circumstances of families experienced during the pandemic but also exemplifies a proactive response by this rural school district. By adopting the MyEducation Data platform (Trenholm & White, 2016), which emphasizes real-time data-driven decision-making, the school is poised to revolutionize how they engage with families. The platform's tailored dashboard provides a comprehensive overview of each student's behavior, attendance, enrollment, and grades, enabling more insightful discussions between school leaders, teachers, and parents. With timely access to this wealth of information, educators can lead productive conversations that effectively address the specific strengths and needs of every student. This shift in approach holds the potential to significantly impact the outcomes and support plans for each student, ultimately enhancing their educational experience while increasing the quality of family engagement practices. The MyEducation Data platform (Trenholm & White, 2016), as a data-driven educational resource for increasing parent and family engagement, is one example of a future technological resource of promise highlighted in this rural school case study.

Partnerships for the Future

The bridge to academic success is built with strong school and family relationships (Constantino, 2003; Epstein, 2001; Hill & Tyson, 2009). Evidence of effectiveness of “well-developed programs of school, family, and community partnerships for student success means that educators can no longer afford to let parents figure out how they can be involved in their children’s education” (Epstein, 2007, p. 17). Such engagement is particularly important during middle school, where transitions take place from elementary to high school. Programs such as

student visitations and school tours are established to help students find success, but few are geared toward parents (Carter & Healey, 2012).

ESSA (2015) emphasized clear goals preparing students for success in college and careers. The U.S. Department of Education (2016) noted that raising the next generation is a shared responsibility. If Marzano (2003) is right that parent and community involvement is the third most-important factor behind curriculum and effective monitoring of goals, then parent engagement through adult learning may be the link (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) is one of the few researched-based partnership models that has clear action plans targeting school problems resulting in improved family engagement (Epstein, 2005). Once parent engagement increased, so did attendance rates, which resulted in better academic success. The National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) annually publishes a book titled *Promising Practice* (National Network of Partnership Schools, 2015), which is a compilation of successful parent engagement programs for grades K-12. NNPS worked with over 1,000 schools to create this valuable resource. As a result, 17 state departments of education collaborated with NNPS to guide district level leadership to strengthen parent programs (Epstein, 2005).

As educational leaders plan promising practices, it is important to evaluate research and work with a team to determine how this research can be applied to have a positive impact on individual schools (Epstein, 2007; Lloyd-Smith & Baron, 2011). *Breaking Ranks in the Middle* (National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 2006) described parent involvement as central to a school's success in different ways, depending on the school. Some school districts need school-based decision-making councils, while others may need to provide

opportunities for parents to be fully engaged in different ways than they were during their child's elementary school years.

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) recommended that administrators be proactive in creating a culture of learning with parents (2006). For example, a school district advisory group and a middle school collaborative action team can create strong stakeholder partnerships. Moreover, progress monitoring can identify the safety nets for student improvement. As principals and action teams target areas of need in middle school, it is important for them to know that the principal's influence has a strong impact on school climate (Hutchins, 2011). Hutchins (2011) examined eight middle schools with promising practices for parent engagement and found the principal had a positive influence on parent involvement workshops and the effective implementation of school improvement meetings.

Building bridges to academic success requires robust partnerships between schools, families, and communities, as research underscores the pivotal role of parent engagement, particularly during pivotal transitions like the middle school years. Initiatives like the NNPS offer actionable models, driving home the importance of administrators fostering inclusive cultures that empower parents and drive positive school climates. Ultimately, it's the collaboration between educators, parents, and stakeholders that lays the groundwork for enhanced student achievement and successful educational practices at every level.

Summary

The literature review encompasses a comprehensive exploration of family engagement across various dimensions in educational settings. Beginning with an examination of the historical context, it delves into the evolution of family involvement in education. Traditional approaches are scrutinized, highlighting established practices and their impact on student

outcomes. Title I implications further explain the legal and policy framework supporting family engagement, emphasizing its importance for underserved communities. The nexus between parental involvement and student achievement is a focal point, shedding light on how active parental participation correlates with academic success.

As perceptions are a critical aspect, stakeholder views on parent engagement provided valuable insights into how different parties perceive and value family involvement. The review then navigates through the pandemic lens, assessing how family engagement dynamics shifted during the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 crisis. Rural settings bring a unique context into play, exploring how family engagement is experienced in less densely populated areas, where community dynamics often play a central role in education.

The conceptual framework of the national PTA standards emphasizes a proactive approach where parents take on a role akin to educators, actively participating in their child's learning journey. Family engagement resources and educational practices are examined, offering a practical perspective on the tools and strategies available to foster effective collaboration between schools and families. Post-pandemic funding considerations emerge as a critical area of focus, exploring how resources could be allocated to bolster family engagement efforts during and after the pandemic. Finally, the literature review ventures into the future, contemplating the evolving landscape of family engagement and its anticipated trajectory. An educational platform of promise is envisioned, setting forth a vision for a dynamic and inclusive educational environment that optimizes family-school partnerships for the benefit of student success and well-being.

Through a qualitative case study approach, research was conducted to examine what defines impactful family engagement practices and partnerships at the middle school level in a

rural school district from the perspectives of leaders, teachers, and parents as defined in the national family-school partnership standards. In the next chapter, the research questions, research design, researcher's paradigm, and data analysis of the case study are discussed. A description of the setting and participants are provided as well as a review of the data collection and data analysis methods that were executed in this study. To conclude, trustworthiness methods are presented.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

This case study examined family engagement practices at the middle school level in a rural district from the perspectives of leaders, teachers, and parents. Specifically, it sought to understand current practices in this setting and impact for the future. Data collection included interviews and focus groups for each of the three stakeholder groups.

The research methodology used in this study is described in this chapter. This information is organized into the following sections: (1) research paradigm, (2) research questions, (3) research design, (4) conceptual framework, (5) theoretical framework, (6) limitations (7) participant recruitment, setting, and selection, (8) data collection methods, (9) data analysis, and (10) trustworthiness, ethics, and research standards. Specifically, it sought to understand current practices in this setting and impact for the future.

Research Paradigm

The paradigm used in this study is a constructivist paradigm. The constructive paradigm aims at comprehending the life experience of the world from the perspective of persons who have that experience (Lather, 2006). A constructive paradigm is used in this research because the researcher wanted to better understand the family engagement practices at the middle school level in a rural school district.

A qualitative research approach was used for this study. A qualitative approach is the collection, analysis, and interpretation of non-numerical data to acquire insights into a specific phenomenon of interest. Qualitative research methods have different beliefs and are designed for different goals than quantitative research methods (Gay et al., 2009). A qualitative approach was selected because the researcher collected, analyzed, and interpreted comprehensive narrative data

from participant stakeholders to gain insight into the family engagement practices shared and expressed by leaders, teachers, and parents.

The research method used in this study was a case study method. Case study research is a qualitative research approach in which researchers target a unit of study known as a bounded system (e.g., individual teachers, a classroom, or a school) (Gay et al., 2009). Creswell and Creswell (2017) provide a lucid and comprehensive definition of case study strategy.

The case study method explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, documents, and reports), and reports a case description and case-based themes (p. 32).

These important perspectives presented by qualitative researchers provided the foundation for the research methodology. Furthermore, a case study method was used for this research because the researcher explored a specific rural school district setting in a midwestern state. This district utilizes a new platform intended to enrich family engagement practices in the district. This case provides important perspectives post-pandemic to shed light on important variables related to family engagement practices and goals.

The data collection process for this study involved conducting interviews and focus groups with three distinct stakeholder groups. These methods offered invaluable opportunities to gather diverse perspectives and insights. Interviews, characterized by one-on-one discussions, allowed for in-depth exploration of individual experiences, opinions, and expertise within each stakeholder category. Additionally, employing focus groups, where participants from each stakeholder group engaged in structured discussions, fostered dynamic interactions, encouraging the exchange and elaboration of ideas among peers. Through these methods, the study aimed to

comprehensively capture the multifaceted viewpoints of these stakeholders, enriching the depth and breadth of the collected data for a more nuanced and thorough analysis.

Research Questions

This research study contained one overarching question and four sub-questions providing the framework for investigation and exploration. The over-arching research question is: How do leaders, teachers, and parents define impactful family engagement practices at the middle school level in a rural school district, based on the National PTA Family-School Partnership standards and the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework? The sub-questions for the study include:

1. How do leaders (i.e., superintendent and principal) describe family engagement resources, information about student growth (i.e., academic, social-emotional, general well-being), and meaningful communication with families?
2. How do teachers describe family engagement resources, information about student growth (i.e., academic, social-emotional, general well-being), and meaningful communication with families?
3. How do parents describe family engagement resources, information about student growth (i.e., academic, social-emotional, general well-being), and meaningful communication with families?
4. What can we learn about family engagement practices from the national PTA standards and the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework to strengthen family-school partnerships?

Research Design

For this research study, the best method to obtain data and information about family engagement was through a qualitative case study analysis. Therefore, a qualitative single case study was selected for this research study. A single case study was associated with Stake's (1995) belief

that the focus of this study was particularization, not generalization. Another important reason that a qualitative single case study was selected was because it provided an opportunity for the researcher to conduct this study within its natural setting. The first step the researcher took in this case was to understand the case contextually and holistically. Once the researcher immersed herself in the data, the next focus was identifying what core patterns emerged from the data collection and then to recognize what made this single case unique. The researcher understood that valid modification of generalization from the audience occurred in this single case study, but the primary reason why the single case study was selected was because of the study's particularization (Stake, 1995).

Case studies are a qualitative design in which the researcher “explores in depth a program, event, activity, process, of one or more individuals” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 28). The case(s) are bound by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time.

Furthermore, Yin (2014) puts forth that a case study can be:

1. Descriptive. In a descriptive case study, the purpose is to ‘describe’ a phenomenon in detail in its real-world context. It is used extensively in sociology and anthropology.
2. Explanatory. The study here looks for causal factors to explain a particular phenomenon. The primary focus of such a case study is to explain ‘why’ and ‘how’ certain conditions come into being, that is, why certain sequence of events occur or do not occur.
3. Exploratory. The purpose here was to study a phenomenon with the intention of ‘exploring’ or identifying fresh research questions which can be used in subsequent research studies in an extensive way.

The case study completed was an exploratory case study. The researcher's understanding is co-constructed with that of the participants through their mutual interaction within the research

setting and dialogic interaction through researcher-initiated data generation efforts such as interviewing and focus groups.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework in this qualitative case study was the National PTA standards for Family School Partnerships (National Parent Teacher Association, 2000). The national PTA standards identify six standards that help schools, PTAs, and school districts improve their family-school partnerships so that all students can thrive. These standards include: 1) Welcome all families, 2) Communicate effectively, 3) Support student success, 4) Speak up for every child, 5) Share power, and 6) Collaborate with the community. These standards served as the framework for the inquiry of this study conducted in a rural middle school in a midwestern state. This school district was further bound by the implementation of a post-pandemic educational resource tool that focuses on family engagement practices and defines this district as a particular case.

Theoretical Framework

The Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.) serves as a holistic model for assessing and improving rural communities by focusing on various forms of capital beyond traditional economic measures. It emphasizes seven key capitals: financial, natural, physical, social, human, cultural, and political. These capitals collectively contribute to community well-being, resilience, and sustainable development. The framework posits that investing in and balancing these diverse assets leads to more inclusive and resilient outcomes for rural areas, guiding initiatives in economic development, education, and social innovation. This multidimensional approach provides a theoretical basis for understanding rural dynamics and supporting comprehensive community growth.

Limitations

The most significant obstacle in this study was the unwillingness of subjects to participate in the interviews or allowance of the researcher to meet with each group of individuals in focus groups. The primary point of contact for the researcher was the middle school principal. The first strategy the researcher used to overcome this obstacle was visiting the school prior to the start of data collection. The researcher also worked on scheduling a face-to-face meeting with the principal and superintendent to articulate the purpose of the study, the approach to the study, and most of all, the potential benefits of the study. This allowed the school and district leaders to better identify any concerns about having the research study conducted in this rural school district setting. This proved to be a valuable strategy for the researcher because it allowed the researcher, superintendent, and principal an opportunity to establish a road map, timeline, and to clarify important details moving forward.

Participant Recruitment, Setting, and Selection

The participants in this qualitative case study were selected through convenient sampling. This was a non-probability type sampling method that relied on data collection from population members who were conveniently available to participate in the study. In this sampling method, all the primary data was used for the research study without any additional requirements. The district superintendent, building principal, four classroom teachers, and eight parents (four 7th grade parents and four 8th grade parents) were recruited and secured as participants. These participants shared perspectives in individual interviews as well as in appropriate focus groups (i.e., teacher focus group, administrator focus group, 7th grade parent focus group, and 8th grade parent focus group). The individual interviews and focus groups provided important perceptions of family engagement and what teachers, administrators, and parents believe is important

regarding family engagement in this setting. Table 3.1 provides a list of pseudonym names for study participants.

Table 3.1

Pseudonym Names for Study Participants

Study Participant	Pseudonym Name
Teacher A	Teacher Willow
Teacher B	Teacher Birch
Teacher C	Teacher Maple
Teacher D	Teacher Oak
Superintendent	Superintendent Pine
Principal	Principal Reed
7 th Grade Parent 1	Parent Sky
7 th Grade Parent 2	Parent River
7 th Grade Parent 3	Parent Meadow
7 th Grade Parent 4	Parent Star
8 th Grade Parent 1	Parent Forest
8 th Grade Parent 2	Parent Ocean
8 th Grade Parent 3	Parent Stone
8 th Grade Parent 4	Parent Moon

The school district where this study was completed was considered a rural school district and was located in a midwestern state. The grade level selected for this case study was middle school (defined as grades seven and eight). According to the building report card found on the state department's website, this middle school's enrollment in 2023-2024 was 166 students at the seventh and eighth grade level. A breakdown of the schools' race/ethnicity was: 42% American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, White and 58% Hispanic.

The researcher followed the research policy outlined by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The first step the researcher took was setting up a meeting to discuss the scope of the study with the superintendent and principal. During this meeting, the researcher discussed the purpose and timeline proposed for the research study. The researcher explained the data collection methods. The first method included face-to-face interviews with the district superintendent, district principal, four classroom teachers, four 7th grade parents, and four 8th grade parents. The researcher recorded these face-to-face interviews with the district superintendent, district principal, four classroom teachers, and four 7th grade parents, and four 8th grade parents. These face-to-face interactions were recorded through a virtual platform, enabling the researcher to later listen, view, and transcribe the sessions. The data collected for this study will be securely stored for three years on a password-protected computer. To safeguard confidentiality, any names in the transcripts were redacted or omitted. In addition, to the interviews, four focus groups were completed. There was a leader focus group, teacher focus group, 7th grade parent focus group, and 8th grade parent focus group. Because this rural district only had one superintendent and one principal at the middle school level, the researcher decided to combine these leadership position perspectives into one focus group.

An invitation letter and consent form were emailed to prospective participants to describe the anticipated study. The letter functioned as a professional and formal introduction to the study, inviting participant stakeholders to contribute their expertise, experiences, and insights to family engagement. This letter described the elements and scope of the study, along with the purpose of the study, what would be done with the data from the study, and the time commitments for participating in the study. The letter also identified the measures and ethical commitment from

the researcher to ensure all data from the interviews and focus groups for the participant groups remained confidential during the study.

The consent forms were obtained from each of the participants in this study. It was important for the researcher to explain the value of gaining consent from participants. The consent form included participation in both the interviews and the focus group portions of the research study. Appendix A contains the letter and consent form designated for leaders, while Appendix B includes those intended for teachers. Additionally, Appendix C features the letter and consent form specifically designed for parents. The researcher gained consent from the district superintendent, district principal, four classroom teachers, four 7th grade parents, and four 8th grade parents prior to the initial face-to-face interviews.

Data Collection Methods

Yin (2009) defines case study as an empirical inquiry which investigates a phenomenon in its real-life context. In case study research, multiple methods of data collection are used, as it involves an in-depth study of a phenomenon. It must be noted, as highlighted by Yin (2009), a case study is not a method of data collection, rather it is a research strategy or design to study a social unit.

Yin (2014) identified that the preparation for data collection can be complex. If this is not done correctly, the entire case study could be jeopardized. To adequately prepare, the researcher must first possess the desired skills and values to perform the set of technical procedures of case study research. Yin (2014) identified some of these skills and values: asking good questions, being a good listener, staying adaptive, having a firm grasp of the issues being studied, avoiding biases, and protecting human subjects. In addition to this, as the researcher collects evidence,

he/she must quickly review the evidence and continually ask why these events or facts appear as they do (Yin, 2014).

Yin (2014) believed that the strengths of conducting interviews as a data collection method in case study research lie in the researcher's ability to target specific topics and gain insight from participants. Interviews can focus directly on the study's topics and provide explanations as well as personal views, such as perceptions, attitudes, and meanings. However, he also identified several weaknesses with interviews. These shortcomings included bias due to poorly articulated questions, response bias, inaccuracies due to poor recall, and reflexivity. Reflexivity is when the interviewee gives an answer, he/she believes is what the interviewer wants to hear (Yin, 2014).

Stake (1995) referred to the interview as the main road to multiple realities. He believed the purpose, for the most part, is not to get simple yes and no answers but strive for descriptions of episodes, linkages, or explanations. During the interview, it is most important to listen. This may include "taking a few or many notes" and requires that "the researcher must stay in control of the data gathering, thinking about what form the account will take in writing" (Stake, 1995, p. 65). Stake also shared that the main questions must be kept in mind, probes carefully created, to add to the interview's repository. Immediately after the interview, the researcher should work to capture the key ideas and episodes in written form. He believed it is more important to focus on listening, take a few notes, and ask for clarification, as this can be much more effective than writing furiously during the interview. The most important thing to implement when collecting data from an interview is scheduling ample time immediately following the interview to prepare interpretive commentary (Stake, 1995).

Patton (1990) discussed three types of qualitative interviews: 1) informal conversation, 2) interview guide, and 3) standardized open-ended. The first type of interview Patton (1990) describes is the informal conversation interview which occurs spontaneously during actual fieldwork and is often performed without the interviewee's knowledge. This can lead to challenges when both collecting and analyzing the data. The second type of interviewing described by Patton (1990) is often considered the most common, the interview guide approach. This is a much more systematic approach to the interview, with the researcher providing an outline or topics to be discussed. During the interview guide approach, it is important for the researcher to probe to clarify and create more in-depth responses. Patton (1990) describes the third interviewing approach as the standardized open-ended interview. This approach follows a very strict script with adherence to the questions. This is the best type of interviewing when using multiple participants as it provides a platform for consistency (Patton, 1990).

The interview type that was implemented in this qualitative single case study was Patton's (1990) interview guided approach. Planning and preparation in the form of guided questions ensured interviews had a clear structure and direction, increasing the likelihood of obtaining valuable information and insights. The researcher followed the outlined questions with fidelity, however, asked follow-up questions to probe and clarify participant responses to ensure understanding of their responses. Appendix D contains the leader interview protocol while Appendix E contains the teacher interview protocol. Additionally, Appendix F features the parent interview protocol. The researcher wanted to create as much consistency as possible among the participants and allow them to answer the questions with the maximum amount of authenticity while seeking opportunities for an in-depth understanding of their perspectives. One of the primary goals of the interviews conducted in this qualitative case study was to obtain as

much information pertaining to family engagement at this middle school site. Secondly, the researcher worked to gather additional insight aligned to the national PTA standards and how this district is meeting and integrating each of these areas into their family engagement practices. Finally, the analysis of these interviews was framed through the lens of the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.), allowing for a deeper understanding of how family engagement efforts contribute to the overall social and cultural wealth in this rural middle school community.

The length of each interview was 45-60 minutes. The interview questions were derived to support the research questions aforementioned in Chapters 1 and 3 and focused on the national PTA standards as a conceptual framework for parent engagement. These questions provided insight into the family engagement practices for this middle school.

The interviews were recorded through zoom transcription services so that a verbatim account was available. A transcript was then created that was reviewed and coded to identify themes from the data. There were a few notes taken during the interview; however, the focus of the researcher was primarily on listening to the answers provided by the participant. These notes were kept in a reflective journal that included personal comments and reflection about the interview. This journal provided a platform to capture key ideas and episodes from the interviews directly after they occurred. Stake (1995) relayed this to be important to the interview process.

In addition, to the interviews, four focus groups were completed. There was a focus group for leaders which included the superintendent and principal, a focus group for teachers, and two focus groups for parents, one for 7th grade parents, and one for 8th grade parents. Focus groups are valuable tools for leaders and teachers seeking to gather in-depth insights and

perspectives from a diverse group of participants. The focus group provided a platform for the researcher to engage with stakeholders, fostering open communication and understanding the concerns and needs of the group (Bryman, 2016). Educators can also benefit from focus groups as they offer a forum for students and parents to share their experiences, preferences, and suggestions, ultimately enhancing the learning environment (Krueger & Casey, 2015). By actively listening to the voices within focus groups, leaders and teachers can gain important perspectives to make informed decisions that better align with the expectations and aspirations of those they serve, thereby fostering a more inclusive and effective educational environment. Appendix G contains the leader focus group protocol while Appendix H contains the teacher focus group protocol. Additionally, Appendix I contains the parent focus group protocol. The focus group questions were informed and adapted from the initial interviews conducted with each of the leader, teacher, and parent interview sessions.

Table 3.2., Table 3.3, and Table 3.4 provide an alignment of research questions with the conceptual framework for leaders, teachers, and parents.

Table 3.2

Protocol Alignment to National PTA Standards - Leaders

Research Question: How do leaders, teachers, and parents define impactful family engagement practices at the middle school level in a rural school district, based on the national family-school partnership standards?	
Sub-question to support the research study: How does the superintendent and principal describe family engagement resources, information about student growth (i.e., academic, social-emotional, general well-being), and meaningful communication with families?	
National Parent Teacher Association Standards and Conceptual Framework	
Standard 1 - Welcome All Families	
Interview Questions	Focus Group Questions

How has your school approached the task of welcoming and involving families' post-pandemic? Probe: Can you tell me about strategies or initiatives implemented by the school to ensure that all families feel welcomed and included?	Tell me about the approaches that have proven successful in fostering family engagement in your school. Probe: How does your school welcome all families?
Interview Questions	Focus Group Questions
How have communication methods or platforms been effective in engaging families since the pandemic? Probe: Do you have examples of challenges or successes in the way you have communicated and connected with families?	Describe the key elements of effective communication with families in a school environment. Probe: How do you envision implementing communication strategies that promote transparency, engagement, and understanding with families? Probe: Can you share any specific instances where effective communication had a significant impact on enhancing the school's relationships with families?
Standard 3 - Support Student Success	
Interview Questions	Focus Group Questions
How does your middle school demonstrate understanding and respect for the diverse cultural family backgrounds in your school? Probe: Could you share instances where the school embraced cultural sensitivity to create a more welcoming environment for families?	Tell me about approaches or initiatives you have implemented to ensure equitable access to resources, educational services, and opportunities for all students to succeed academically and socially. Probe: How do you envision collaborating with parents and the community to create a support system that addresses diverse student needs and fosters an environment where every student can achieve their full potential?
Standard 4 - Speak Up for Every Child	
Interview Questions	Focus Group Questions
How does school-family collaboration impact student academic success and well-being in your school? Probe: Have there been specific administrative efforts aimed at encouraging increased family involvement in student learning and well-being?	How do you actively encourage and embrace the diverse voices and perspectives of students and families? Probe: Describe measures or practices you have implemented to create an inclusive space where students and families feel not only heard, but also valued, respected, and empowered.
Standard 5 - Share Power	
Interview Questions	Focus Group Questions

How has your school differentiated or adapted its approach to engaging families with varying needs and circumstances? Probe: Can you share an example where adjustments were made to better accommodate the needs of families?	Describe practices or structures you have implemented to create a more participatory environment where parents and families feel empowered to contribute to decision-making processes within the school? Probe: How do you envision fostering a collaborative culture that shares power with families and diverse perspectives? Probe: How do you ensure diverse perspectives play a pivotal role in shaping the school's policies and directions?
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Standard 6 - Collaborate With the Community

Interview Questions	Focus Group Questions
How do community partnerships support your school's efforts to welcome families? Probe: Can you discuss successful collaborations or initiatives with parents and community organizations/resources that provided an opportunity for shared decision-making?	Can you tell me about how you collaborate with parents and families? Probe: How do you envision fostering a culture where collaboration is important in shaping school policies and initiatives?

Table 3.3

Protocol Alignment to National PTA Standards - Teachers

Research Question: How do leaders, teachers, and parents define impactful family engagement practices at the middle school level in a rural school district, based on the national family-school partnership standards?
Sub-question to support the research study: How do teachers describe family engagement resources, information about student growth (i.e., academic, social-emotional, general well-being), and meaningful communication with families?

National Parent Teacher Association Standards and Conceptual Framework

Standard 1 - Welcome All Families

Interview Questions	Focus Group Questions
How has your school approached the task of welcoming and involving families' post-pandemic? Probe: Can you tell me about strategies or initiatives implemented by the school to ensure that all families feel welcomed and included?	Tell me about the approaches that have proven successful in fostering family engagement in your school. Probe: How does your school welcome all families?

Standard 2 - Communicate Effectively

Interview Questions	Focus Group Questions
How have communication methods or platforms been effective in engaging families since the pandemic? Probe: Do you have examples of challenges or successes in the way you have communicated and connected with families?	Describe the key elements of effective communication with families in a school environment. Probe: How do you envision implementing communication strategies that promote transparency, engagement, and understanding with families? Probe: Can you share any specific instances where effective communication had a significant impact on enhancing the school's relationships with families?
Standard 3 - Support Student Success	
Interview Questions	Focus Group Questions
How does your middle school demonstrate understanding and respect for the diverse cultural family backgrounds in your school? Probe: Could you share instances where the school embraced cultural sensitivity to create a more welcoming environment for families?	Tell me about approaches or initiatives the school has implemented to ensure equitable access to resources, educational services, and opportunities for your student to succeed academically and socially. Probe: How do you envision collaborating with parents and the community to create a support system that addresses diverse student needs and fosters an environment where every student can achieve their full potential?
Standard 4 - Speak Up for Every Child	
Interview Questions	Focus Group Questions
How does school-family collaboration impact student academic success and well-being in your school? Probe: Have there been specific teacher efforts aimed at encouraging increased family involvement in student learning and well-being?	How do you actively encourage and embrace the diverse voices and perspectives of students and families? Probe: Describe measures or practices you have implemented to create an inclusive space where students and families feel not only heard, but also valued, respected, and empowered.
Standard 5 - Share Power	
Interview Questions	Focus Group Questions

How has your school differentiated or adapted its approach to engaging families with varying needs and circumstances? Probe: Can you share an example where adjustments were made to better accommodate the needs of families?	Describe practices or structures you have implemented to create a more participatory environment where parents and families feel empowered to contribute to decision-making processes within the school. Probe: How do you envision fostering a collaborative culture that shares power with families and diverse perspectives? Probe: How do you ensure diverse perspectives play a pivotal role in shaping the school's policies and directions?
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Standard 6 - Collaborate With the Community

Interview Questions	Focus Group Questions
How do community partnerships support your school's efforts to welcome families? Probe: Can you discuss successful collaborations or initiatives with parents and community organizations/resources that provided an opportunity for shared decision-making?	Can you tell me about how you collaborate with parents and families? Probe: How do you envision fostering a culture where collaboration is important in shaping school policies and initiatives?

Table 3.4

Protocol Alignment to National PTA Standards - Parents

Research Question: How do leaders, teachers, and parents define impactful family engagement practices at the middle school level in a rural school district, based on the national family-school partnership standards?	
Sub-question to support the research study: How do parents describe family engagement resources, information about student growth (i.e., academic, social-emotional, general well-being) and meaningful communication with families?	
National Parent Teacher Association Standards and Conceptual Framework	
Standard 1 - Welcome All Families	
Interview Questions	Focus Group Questions
How has the school approached the task of welcoming and involving family's post-pandemic? Probe: Can you tell me the ways that your school has made you feel welcomed and included?	Tell me about the approaches that the school has implemented that have proven successful in fostering family engagement at the middle school. Probe: How does your school welcome all families?
Standard 2 - Communicate Effectively	

Interview Questions	Focus Group Questions
How has communication from the school changed since the pandemic? Probe: Do you have examples of challenges or successes in the way the school has communicated and connected with you?	What would you say are the key elements to ensure effective communication with families? Probe: What communication strategies does the school use to ensure openness, involvement, and mutual understanding with families? Probe: Can you share any specific instances where communication had a significant impact upon your family?
Standard 3 - Support Student Success	
Interview Questions	Focus Group Questions
How does your middle school demonstrate understanding and respect for the diverse cultural family backgrounds? Probe: Could you share instances where the school embraced cultural sensitivity to create a more welcoming environment for you?	Tell me about approaches or initiatives that the school has implemented to ensure equitable access to resources, educational services, and opportunities for your student to succeed academically and socially. Probe: How has the school collaborated with you to create a support system that addresses diverse student needs and fosters an environment where every student can achieve their full potential?
Standard 4 - Speak Up for Every Child	
Interview Questions	Focus Group Questions
How do you believe the collaboration between school and families influences the academic success and well-being of students at your student's school? Probe: Have you noticed any particular efforts made by the administrator or teachers to encourage greater family involvement in your child's learning and well-being?	How does the school actively encourage and embrace the diverse voices and perspectives of students and families? Probe: Describe practices the school has implemented to create an inclusive space where you and your student(s) feel not only heard, but also valued, respected, and empowered.
Standard 5 - Share Power	
Interview Questions	Focus Group Questions

How has the school adjusted its methods to involve your family with your students' different needs and circumstances? Probe: Can you share an example where adjustments were made to better accommodate the needs of your family?	Describe practices or structures the school has implemented to create a more participatory environment where you and your student(s) feel empowered to contribute to decision-making processes within the school. Probe: How does the school foster a collaborative culture that shares power with you and your student(s)? Probe: How does the school ensure diverse perspectives play a pivotal role in shaping the school's policies and directions?
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Standard 6 - Collaborate With the Community

Interview Questions	Focus Group Questions
How does the community contribute to your school's efforts in welcoming you? Probe: Can you share any successful collaborations or initiatives involving parents and community organizations/resources that allowed you to participate in the decisions?	Can you tell me about how administrators and teachers collaborate with parents and families? Probe: How does the school foster a culture where collaboration is important in shaping school policies and initiatives?

Data Analysis

It was imperative that the researcher looked beyond the surface when analyzing the data collected. The researcher worked to understand how the data was interconnected between the participants at this site and how the data from the focus groups informed the initial perspectives captured by the interviews. In qualitative research, the researcher identifies categories and themes based on the data from the interviews and focus groups; reducing the data through the coding process into meaningful interpretations aligned to the study's research questions. The next section details the specific process of analyzing the data.

Bogdan and Bilken (2007) identified the following phases for the qualitative researcher to work through when analyzing the data: discovering, coding, discounting, and asking questions about the data. During the discovery stage, the researcher read, reread the data, and then began recording categories, themes, ideas, and interpretations. The next step included creating tentative

lists of emerging patterns. Upon the creation of this list, the researcher noticed trends and connections to the national PTA standards. By reviewing the literature and data again, the researcher began to integrate and connect tentative themes to the conceptual framework that had been identified from the data.

The next step in Bogdan and Bilken's (2007) process was the coding phase. During this phase, the researcher worked to develop coding categories and coded all the data related to these categories. The raw data containing focus group and interview transcripts was analyzed and categorized through a first phase a priori coding process and a second phase In Vivo coding. Saldana (2016) states that a priori coding provides a temporary outline of codes enabling a researcher to analyze data focused on research goals and questions. A priori coding allowed the researcher to build on the depth of the literature review and the national PTA standards in the initial analysis of the data. Having a sense of how the data might be represented, provided a provisional structure for the data.

Once the data was coded, data was sorted into categories to begin refining the analysis by continuing to look across the themes and categories. Bogdan and Bilken (2007) identify two important tips during the coding phase. The first is to look at the "leftover" data and think about what is not in the data. When discounting data, the researcher focused on the context in which the data was collected. Thinking about the following factors was important at this phase of the data analysis process: solicitation/un-solicitation of the data, observer's influence of setting, participants, and most importantly, the researcher's own assumptions. Finally, Bogdan and Bilken (2007) recommend the researcher needs to ask questions about the data. What stands out in the data? What are the patterns and silences? What questions are related to the conceptual framework? These can all serve as a final check to tie the data together in the analysis process

(Bogdan and Bilken, 2007). This process provided the structure that the researcher followed when analyzing the data for this single qualitative case study. The researcher attempted to follow these steps with fidelity and consistency throughout the data analysis process.

Trustworthiness, Ethics, and Research Standards

While striving to comprehend perspectives and interpretations, the researcher undertook essential measures to guarantee validity. An ethical lens was consistently and constantly applied throughout the research process and data analysis (Dibley et al., 2020). This study employed multiple strategies to increase its validity, trustworthiness, and ethical practices. These strategies included the use of vulnerability and openness, member checking, peer review, and peer debrief. First, the general concepts researched in this study (e.g., rural, middle school, family engagement) may be transferrable to other contexts. Second, returning findings or interpretations to the participants for their validation, feedback, or clarification allows the participants to verify the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations. Next, peer review and debrief aims to ensure academic rigor and quality before dissemination.

Vulnerability and Openness. Morse (2015) expounds that prolonged engagement and persistent observation are requisite for generating thick, rich data. Prolonged engagement developed more trust with participants. Therefore, the researcher used preexisting relationships with the participants to encourage trust and vulnerability. The vulnerability and openness of the participants met Tracy's (2010) criteria of sincerity and resonance. Participants were treated with dignity and respect. They were encouraged to share with vulnerability, and the researcher suspended judgement. As participants shared, the researcher was present and was aware of her own preconceptions while giving participants space to share their perceptions without judgment.

The researcher continued to confront her subjectivities and own thinking throughout the data analysis. This practice continued to provide credibility and transparency to the study.

Member checking. Trustworthiness was also achieved through a variation of member checking. Creswell and Creswell (2017) advise that researchers ask, “Is the transcription accurate?” (p. 215). Participants had the opportunity to view transcripts and data analysis not through the means of just member checking, but rather to refine the understanding of their perceptions (Birt et al., 2016). Tracy (2010) describes this practice as member reflections: “member reflections are less a test of research findings as they are an opportunity for collaboration and reflexive elaboration” (p. 844). This practice increased the validity and credibility of the study as it allowed for an assurance that the researcher understood the essence of the participants’ experiences. Therefore, each participant had the opportunity to review transcripts as well as themes that emerged from the coding of the transcripts. Through this transparent process and feedback, participants were able to offer additional insight and verify the accuracy of the data collected. An additional way to address trustworthiness is the researcher’s consideration of their own subjectivity and role in the study. The researcher-built trust through transparency and ongoing communication. Tracy (2010) describes this practice as member reflections: “member reflections are less a test of research findings as they are an opportunity for collaboration and reflexive elaboration” (p. 844). This practice increased the validity and credibility of the study as it allowed for an assurance that the researcher understood the essence of the participants’ experiences. Through this transparent process and feedback, participants were able to offer additional insight and verify the accuracy of the data collected. An additional way to address trustworthiness is the researcher’s consideration of their own subjectivity and role in the study. The researcher established trust through transparency and ongoing communication.

Peer review and peer debriefing. Peer review and peer debriefing are critical processes in research methodology, playing distinct yet complementary roles in ensuring the credibility, rigor, and quality of scholarly work. Peer review, as emphasized by Creswell (2013), is pivotal in validating research and maintaining its integrity before dissemination. It involves practitioners/experts in the field evaluating the research, thereby contributing to its credibility and adherence to academic standards. On the other hand, peer debriefing, as discussed by Ware (2008), involves discussions among peers to scrutinize qualitative research, identify biases, and enhance trustworthiness. These processes complement each other: peer review ensures the academic rigor of research, while peer debriefing offers critical insights and scrutiny, contributing to the overall quality and validity of the study by providing a more thorough evaluation from multiple perspectives. Together, they fortify the scholarly integrity of research findings and methodologies.

Summary

This study used a qualitative single case study research design with interviews as the primary source of data. Participants from this district included the district superintendent, school principal, four classroom teachers, four parents from 7th grade, and four parents from 8th grade. Focus group discussions served as the secondary source of data. There were four focus groups: one for leaders which included the superintendent and principal, a focus group for teachers, one for 7th grade parents, and one for 8th grade parents.

The data from these sources were transcribed, coded, and analyzed. The national PTA standards were used as the conceptual framework to examine the data. In addition, the data were framed through the lens of the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.). The findings from the data analysis process will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4 - Findings

This chapter analyzes and shares the findings by identifying categories deriving the main themes for each data collection point and stakeholder group. This analysis included an alignment of the themes to the conceptual framework of the national PTA standards and tenets surrounding the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.), the theoretical framework used for the study. Due to the cohesiveness and natural alignment of the data to the overall themes for each stakeholder group and the national PTA standards, the researcher provided rich participant quotes and supporting ideas, while also offering broader interpretations regarding the findings garnered from the study. The over-arching research question for the study was: How do leaders, teachers, and parents define impactful family engagement practices at the middle school level in a rural school district, based on the National PTA Family-School Partnership standards and the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework?

The findings are organized in the sections below by interviews, focus group, and overall, for each stakeholder group. An in-depth discussion of how the overall themes for each stakeholder group inform and connect with the conceptual and theoretical framework are also presented. A summary for overall findings across stakeholder groups, with connections to the conceptual and theoretical frameworks, concludes the chapter. The next section will answer research sub question two: How do teachers describe family engagement resources, information about student growth (i.e., academic, social-emotional, general well-being), and meaningful communication with families?

Teacher Interviews – Categories and Themes

Each interview was conducted in person. Interviews with the teachers were conducted individually using predetermined questions. Coding was done with an in vivo style method and

using priori codes. Appendix J is a summary of the most important and prevalent themes and categories which emerged from teacher interviews aligned with the national PTA standards and the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.). The table in Appendix J highlights the themes that guide family-school partnerships by emphasizing communication, inclusivity, and collaborative practices that provide a roadmap for involving families more effectively in school environments.

The teacher interview findings highlight key areas for fostering effective family and community engagement in education. The five themes identified from the teacher interviews included: 1) Community Partnerships and Support, 2) Family Engagement and Involvement, 3) Communication Methods and Platforms, 4) Cultural Sensitivity and Inclusivity, and 5) Academic Success and Student Needs. These themes bring to light practical strategies teachers are using to bridge gaps and strengthen connections with families. For example, Teacher Birch shared, “Community partnerships, such as ball game buyouts, help eliminate financial barriers for families.” The cost of attending activities can be prohibitive for families with multiple students. When community businesses cover the cost for activity attendance, more families can participate. “Family involvement in education is a powerful resource especially when families and schools work together,” as noted by Teacher Maple. Efforts like inviting families for tours and back-to-school nights are seen as effective in fostering engagement, yet participation remains low. This is especially challenging at the middle school level and among Spanish-speaking families. Teacher Oak noted “the difficulty in engaging middle school parents, due to the short time frame their children are in school, leads to doubts about the impact of their involvement.”

This highlights the ongoing need for effective communication with families of all backgrounds. Teacher Willow commented, “I enjoy making monthly positive parent phone calls highlighting my students.” Teacher Oak shared, “The MyEducation Data newsletter is a great way for all families to remain involved as language should not be the barrier.” In addition, cultural perspectives also play a role, with some families trusting the school’s efforts while others feel detached due to differing priorities and needs. Teacher Birch noted, “Translation is a high priority for our building as we continue to enroll students that do not speak the English language.”

The last theme highlighted academic success. Technology-based platforms such as MyEducation Data (Trenholm & White, 2016), allow a bridge to increase communication and focus on student learning. Teacher Maple stated, “The use of MyEducation Data provides comprehensive insights into students' academic performance.” It is important for schools to remember when implementing technology programs that prioritizing updates can help support parents that still feel overwhelmed using new systems.

Teacher Focus Group – Categories and Themes

Each focus group was conducted in person. Focus groups with the teachers were conducted individually using predetermined questions. Coding was done with an in vivo style method and using priori codes. Appendix K is a summary of the most important and prevalent themes and categories which emerged from the teacher focus group aligned with the national PTA standards and the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.). The table in Appendix K highlights the themes that guide family-school partnerships by emphasizing the alignment of family engagement initiatives with educational standards and community resources, emphasizing the importance of diverse parental involvement, effective communication, equitable

resource access, cultural understanding, and empowerment to support student success and foster community partnerships. This framework provides a comprehensive understanding of how different types of capital (i.e., social, human, physical, and cultural) can be leveraged to strengthen school-community ties, ensuring equitable engagement across diverse, rural populations.

The teacher's focus group findings highlight key areas for fostering effective family and community engagement in education. The seven themes identified from the teacher focus group included: 1) Parental Involvement, 2) Communication Challenges, 3) Technology Utilization, 4) Resource Accessibility, 5) Cultural Influence, 6) Empowerment Initiatives, and 7) Resource Accessibility. These themes highlight effective strategies teachers are implementing to close gaps and build stronger relationships with families. Parents are a child's first and most consistent teacher, and their engagement in school life reinforces the importance of education. Teacher Willow stated, "When families are involved, they create a powerful support system that extends the reach of learning beyond the classroom." Teachers in the study found that fostering parental involvement strengthens these connections. Teacher Birch shared, "When parents volunteer or simply show up, it demonstrates to students that they're part of a community that values their growth."

Strong communication between schools and families forms the foundation of mutual trust. Teachers emphasized that clear, consistent communication helps parents feel informed and equipped to support their children. Teacher Willow shared, "Communicating openly with families gives them confidence that their role in their child's education matters." Through newsletters, parent-teacher meetings, and direct phone calls, schools create pathways that keep parents connected and empowered.

Each community faces its own set of challenges, and understanding these is key to finding solutions. Barriers such as limited time, financial pressures, and language differences can impact family participation. Teacher Oak explained, "A lot of parents want to be involved but have demanding schedules or other responsibilities. We need to be flexible and meet them where they are." By acknowledging these challenges, schools can find ways to foster inclusivity and provide meaningful engagement opportunities.

Technology has become a valuable tool in supporting family involvement. Virtual meetings, online resources, and mobile communication apps enable families to engage with schools on their own terms. Teacher Birch noted, "Technology opens doors for parents who may not be able to come to school physically," Teacher Birch also observed, "It keeps them in the loop and makes them feel like part of the community." Schools leveraging technology create multiple access points for families, promoting consistent and flexible engagement.

Resource access plays a significant role in creating educational equity. Schools often help families connect with support services, whether for academic assistance or other needs. "Making resources accessible helps level the playing field for all our students," noted Teacher Willow. Schools that bridge families to essential resources help create an environment where every child is positioned to succeed and feel supported.

Cultural understanding and appreciation are integral to building a welcoming school environment. Teachers stress the importance of recognizing and honoring the diverse backgrounds within their communities. "When we respect and incorporate students' cultures into the school setting, it benefits everyone," Teacher Maple remarked. "It lets families know we value them as they are," Teacher Maple concluded. Schools that celebrate cultural diversity promote inclusivity and encourage stronger family-school connections.

Empowering families to participate in school decisions strengthens the whole community. Teachers believe that giving families a voice fosters a sense of belonging and ownership in the educational process. Teacher Oak commented, "When families are actively involved in decisions, they feel like real partners in our school community." Schools that invest in empowerment initiatives see parents who are engaged, committed, and enthusiastic about supporting their children's education.

Finally, when schools ensure that resources are available and accessible, it benefits the entire community. Teachers highlighted the importance of making educational materials, programs, and support services within reach for all families. "Access to resources is what ultimately allows every student to thrive," said Teacher Birch. Schools that provide these connections foster an environment where every child can succeed, no matter their background.

These themes collectively illustrate the essential role schools play in building strong partnerships with families. Through involvement, communication, overcoming challenges, utilizing technology, ensuring resource accessibility, valuing cultural diversity, and empowering families, schools create a comprehensive and inclusive approach that benefits the entire school community.

Teacher – Overall Categories and Themes

The teachers' descriptions of family engagement from interviews and focus groups provided an understanding of the dispositions, experiences, and perceptions important to this study. Appendix L highlights the overall five themes and 15 categories with a detailed analysis of these themes related to the study's conceptual and theoretical frameworks. The overall themes for teachers participating in the study are presented in the following section.

Theme 1: Community Partnerships and Support

A central pillar of a school's success lies in its robust community partnerships. This specific school site has a community-funded initiative that exemplifies this support called the Eagle Market. Teacher Willow shared, “This market, set up like a small store, provides essential items such as food, clothing, school supplies, and hygiene products, ensuring students' basic needs are met.” It is sustained through generous contributions from local businesses, churches, and individuals, demonstrating a continuous community investment in student well-being. Teacher Willow went on to share, “The school advertises the Eagle Market at the beginning of the year and during enrollment, offers new students essential supplies like backpacks and notebooks, which brings excitement and immediate benefits.” Teacher Birch added, “the school conducts fundraisers for programs like Project Hope, with initiatives such as can drives, which sometimes result in donations back to Eagle Market, creating a cyclical support system that strengthens community ties.” Local business sponsorships also contribute to food for incentive parties, underscoring the depth and commitment of community involvement in fostering student success.

Theme 2: Family Engagement and Involvement

Family engagement is a critical aspect of the school's efforts, with a range of strategies implemented to include parents in their middle school student's education. Technology has played a key role, particularly through tools like QR codes and platforms such as MyEducation Data and Google Classroom, allowing families to access information and stay involved even if they cannot attend in-person events. Despite these efforts, variations in participation are noticeable, particularly at non-athletic events, where parental involvement tends to be lower. Teacher Maple shared, “I understand the parents' perspective, realizing that some parents are

reluctant to engage in activities like site council or sports boosters after a long workday.” The school has increased its use of technology for communication since the pandemic, offering several opportunities for engagement throughout the year, including family nights and parent-teacher conferences. Teacher Oak noted, “Family engagement has become less meaningful, as quick messages and newsletters have replaced in-person interactions.” Additionally, participation often wanes after the initial enthusiasm following parent-teacher conferences, with engagement perceived as strong early in the year but declining by November. Teacher Willow noted, “To encourage ongoing involvement, the school has implemented a weekly family email that includes a family challenge to foster parent-child engagement at home, with incentives such as prizes, which some families have embraced by sharing their activities through photos.”

Theme 3: Communication Methods and Platforms

Communication between the school and families has evolved, with digital platforms becoming the norm. While tools such as Google Classroom, email, MyEducation Data (Trenholm & White, 2016), and text messaging provide immediate access to information, there is a concern that parents may become overwhelmed by the volume of updates. Teacher Oak stated, “Most parents are more engaged with "My Education Data" than Google Classroom, as it involves both students and teachers, and they are taught how to use it during parent-teacher conferences in September.” Teacher Oak also mentioned, “That since the pandemic, even those who were previously less tech-savvy, like older generations, have become proficient with technology, reducing the need for paper communication.” Some parents have found the multiple logins required for My Education Data (Trenholm & White, 2016) overwhelming, though it provides comprehensive information such as MAP scores and state assessments. Teacher Maple highlighted, “the school uses Google Classroom for posting daily notes, which helps keep

parents informed about their child’s activities, though it was initially a big adjustment for some.”

Despite these digital efforts, some parents still prefer traditional in-person communication, underscoring the ongoing need for a balanced approach to accommodate different preferences and ensure clear, accessible information for all families.

Theme 4: Cultural Sensitivity and Inclusivity

The school has made cultural sensitivity and inclusivity central to its mission, recognizing the diverse backgrounds within its student body. A significant portion of the student population consists of non-English-speaking families, predominantly Spanish-speaking, and the school has adapted by ensuring that all communications sent home are translated into Spanish before distribution. This proactive approach allows families to stay informed and involved, minimizing language barriers that might otherwise hinder engagement. Teacher Maple shared, “This year, with an influx of Spanish-speaking students, the school has enhanced its communication strategies, incorporating translators, Google Translate, and iPads equipped with translation apps to facilitate seamless interactions between staff, students, and parents.” Teachers and staff receive specialized training from programs like Apple Vanguard on how to translate online work and adjust device settings for Spanish communication, ensuring that technology is accessible to everyone.

Teacher Willow shared, “Our bilingual staff members, have become invaluable assets, not only assisting with translation but also providing academic and emotional support to students.” Teacher Oak commented, “They often stay late to connect with students, offering guidance on both academic and non-academic topics, which helps create a supportive and inclusive environment.” Their presence bridges cultural gaps, providing students with trusted figures who understand their background and can offer tailored assistance.

To further accommodate the linguistic and cultural needs of the community, the school has implemented additional resources and tools. For instance, add-ons for Google Classroom have been incorporated to allow teachers to create quizzes and assignments in Spanish. However, some limitations remain, as Google Classroom itself doesn't offer built-in translation, but other Google apps have helped bridge this gap, providing a more inclusive learning experience.

The school also works to ensure that parents feel comfortable and respected during school events, like parent-teacher conferences, by providing translation services and culturally relevant resources. The middle school demonstrates respect for diverse cultural backgrounds by not only translating materials but also actively considering cultural nuances in its policies and interactions. Teacher Birch discussed, "different cultural norms, such as views on punctuality and formality can impact how families engage with the school." To this end, the school strives to foster a welcoming atmosphere, showing families that their heritage is valued and creating a foundation for lasting engagement and mutual respect. Through these efforts, the school demonstrates its commitment to embracing diversity and ensuring that all families, regardless of language or background, can actively participate in their children's education.

Theme 5: Academic Success and Student Needs

A focus on academic success is evident through the school's implementation of innovative teaching methods and tailored support for diverse learning needs. Teacher Birch shared, "Teachers utilize differentiated instruction and create daily instructional videos that can be reused each year, ensuring that all students, including those who may be absent or face language barriers, have access to essential educational support." Teacher Oak added, "I have implemented a new strategy where elective teachers create short videos explaining their courses, accessible through QR codes, to help families make informed decisions about elective choices."

This use of videos and QR codes enhances communication with parents, allowing them to access information even if they cannot attend in-person meetings, which Teacher Oak shared, “is an improvement over traditional paper forms.”

Despite these efforts, challenges remain in effectively grouping students due to the wide variation in academic and diagnostic levels, which requires ongoing adjustments to meet the evolving needs of students. Teacher Willow shared, “the importance of a supportive school-family collaboration, which has evolved over the years, is particularly important regarding accountability.” Teacher Willow stated, “this collaboration positively impacts student academic success and well-being, especially through initiatives like student-led conferences held twice a year and the use of the My Education data platform, which gives parents greater insight into their children’s progress.” However, Teacher Maple, noted, “schools must ensure student success independently of parental involvement, as educators are sometimes the only source of motivation and encouragement for students.”

Teacher – Overall Conceptual Framework Connections

Building on the detailed examination of the school’s strategies and initiatives offered by teachers, clear connections emerge between these efforts and the national PTA standards. Each standard promotes inclusive and supportive family-school partnerships applied to rural school contexts.

Standard 1: Welcome All Families

“Our local school market serves as a vital resource for families, ensuring that all students have access to necessary items and fostering an inclusive environment” Teacher Willow explained. This aligns with the community partnerships and support category, particularly in terms of resource support and engagement in activities. The welcoming atmosphere extends

through effective communication, which is crucial for enhancing family engagement and involvement.

Standard 2: Communicate Effectively

“Effective communication is crucial for fostering community engagement” Teacher Oak explained. The transparent dialogue between the coordinator, students, and parents regarding the local school market promotes understanding and encourages family participation, addressing the communication methods and platforms category. The early advertising efforts ensure that families are informed about resources, helping to bridge technology barriers that may exist post-pandemic. This open communication strengthens community ties, which are vital for building relationships and support within rural areas.

Standard 3: Support Student Success

Initiatives that involve local businesses sponsoring food for incentive parties and community support for academic events, such as math nights, demonstrate a collective effort to promote student achievement. This reflects the academic success and student needs category by emphasizing the role of family collaboration and teacher support. Teacher Birch noted “school-family collaboration positively impacts student academic success and well-being, particularly through student-led conferences held twice a year and the significant role of the MyEducation Data platform” (Trenholm & White, 2016). The availability of supplies and resources through the local school market directly contributes to students’ academic success, showcasing the importance of differentiation for diverse needs within the student population. Teachers are also creating daily lesson videos that can be reused yearly, helping absent students keep up with their work.

Standard 4: Speak Up for Every Child

The observation of disparity in community involvement based on athletic performance stresses the need for advocacy and greater recognition and funding for non-sport activities. This connects to cultural sensitivity and inclusivity, highlighting the importance of ensuring that all students, regardless of their interests, have equal opportunities to succeed. Teacher Willow emphasized that “the outlook of teaching is daunting, partly due to community involvement and accountability,” and that if parents observed the classroom, they would realize the challenges, such as accommodating students with diverse needs. Speaking up for underrepresented programs promotes equity and fairness, vital for holistic community development.

Standard 5: Share Power

The increased participation of the parent advisory committee indicates a growing empowerment of families in school decisions and activities, relating to family engagement and involvement. Encouraging family support for events, such as concerts, illustrates shared power within the community. Teacher Willow shared that “school-family collaboration has evolved significantly over the years, particularly in terms of accountability.” Teacher Willow also mentioned colleagues who “cut their lunch short to ensure tests were translated and printed for students on time,” highlights the dedication to student success. Teacher Willow also stated, “Making home visits and spending time with families on weekends will improve family engagement.” These efforts serve to empower parents.

Standard 6: Collaborate with the Community

Community partnerships that support initiatives like the local school market and funding for events showcase a collaborative spirit, aligning with the community partnerships and support theme, particularly in terms of donation and funding cycles. The idea of organizing an expo to

raise awareness for the robotics program further strengthens community ties and emphasizes the value of collaboration with local businesses and organizations. This builds both economic and social wealth, creating a sustainable support system for schools. Teacher Willow stated, “Schools must ensure student success even if parents are not involved, as sometimes educators are the only source of motivation for students.” The middle school also faces challenges regarding cultural knowledge, particularly about Hispanic culture. Teacher Oak emphasized “cultural differences, such as punctuality, are often overlooked and can lead to frustration because they don't align with American norms.” Additionally, Teacher Oak noted, “Hispanic students being tardy is not due to a lack of discipline, but rather a cultural difference regarding punctuality.” The teacher went on to express concern about the impact of frequent quarantines on student participation in sports and school activities, noting a lack of relationship with current students. Teacher Birch stated, “In our rural setting, family engagement improved, due to less concern about government directives.” The school adapts to individual student needs, such as addressing fears related to bus rides, and supports students regardless of ethnicity or socioeconomic status.

Teacher – Overall Theoretical Framework Connections

The data obtained from teacher interviews and focus groups connects to the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.), particularly in terms of social capital and human capital. Regarding social capital, the increased participation of the parent advisory committee and the shared decision-making processes illustrate the building of social networks and relationships within the community. This involvement fosters trust and collaboration among families, schools, and educators, essential for a supportive educational environment. These shared decision-making processes ensure diverse voices are included in shaping educational

environments. In addition, the local school market enhances social capital by addressing basic needs which are key components of the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.).

With respect to human capital, the dedication of teachers, as evidenced by their willingness to adapt schedules and engage with families through home visits, highlights the investment in human capital. Their actions demonstrate a commitment to improving student outcomes and enhancing family engagement, which is crucial for fostering educational success. Shared power is demonstrated by the emphasis on family involvement and empowerment aligns with the framework's focus on inclusivity. By ensuring diverse voices are represented in school decisions, the community is strengthened, and more equitable educational experiences are created.

Finally, the welcoming environment connects to the framework's goal of creating supportive and nurturing spaces for growth and development. This framework demonstrates how family engagement and collaboration in education can enhance various forms of capital within the community, contributing to sustainable rural development. Addressing cultural differences, such as attitudes toward punctuality, is crucial for building an inclusive environment that recognizes and values diverse backgrounds. The emphasis on educators as key motivators underscores the role of human capital in driving student success, especially in rural areas where family engagement may vary.

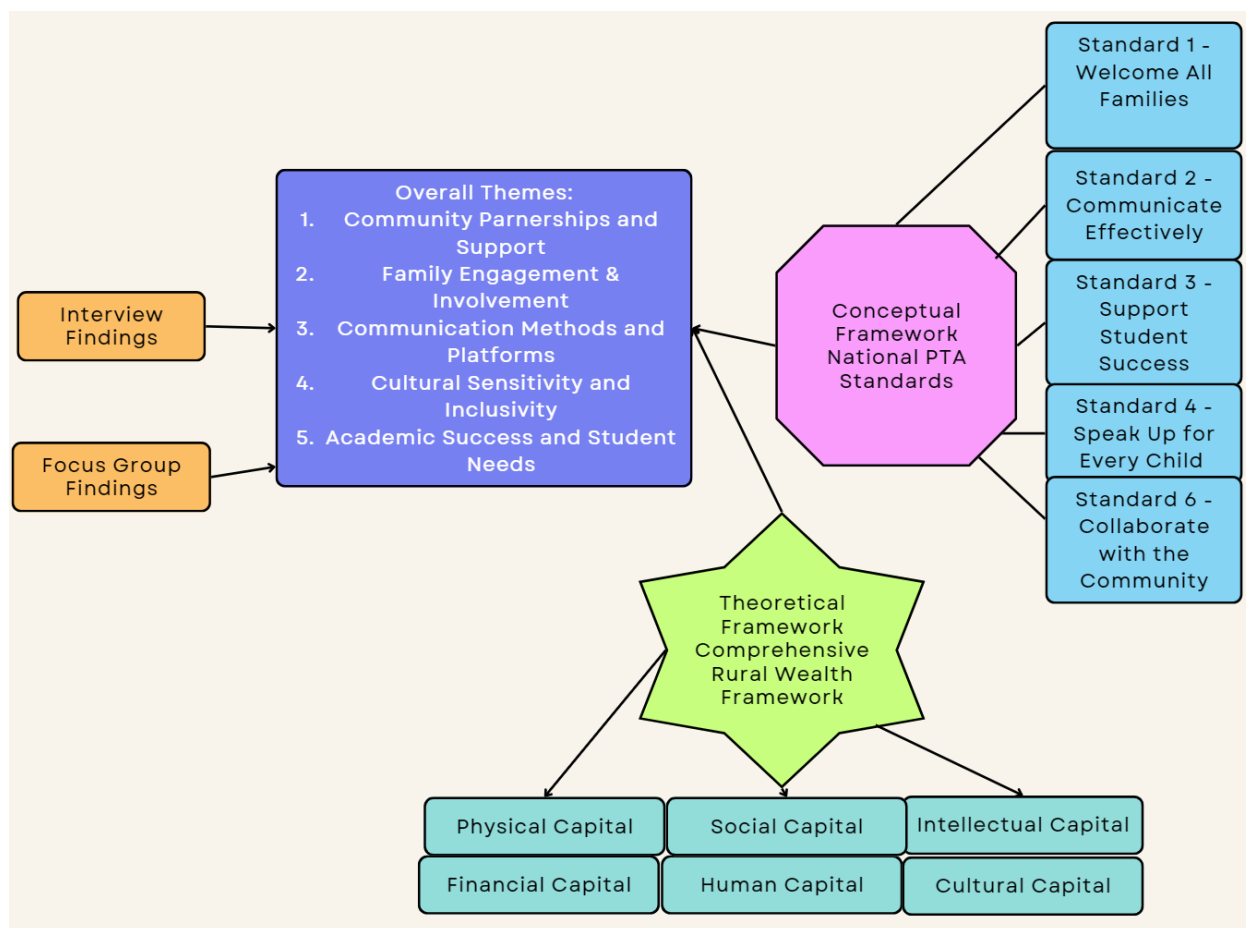
Additionally, the mention of how community dynamics change in response to external pressures, like government directives, shows the resilience and adaptability of rural communities. This holistic approach not only supports educational outcomes, but also strengthens social and cultural wealth, ultimately contributing to the sustainability of rural areas.

Summary of Teacher Findings

Figure 1 visualizes the integration of teacher interview and focus group findings with the national PTA standards and the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.). It illustrates how empirical data collected from teachers supports the broader educational goals of engaging families and communities while addressing diverse student needs through various forms of capital including social, human, and cultural.

Figure 1

Teacher Overall Data Collection and Findings



In summary, the teachers feel the school has demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability in addressing the needs of its students, families, and teachers. Community partnerships, exemplified by the local school market, provide crucial support, while

technological solutions have enabled continued family engagement. However, challenges persist, particularly in sustaining meaningful involvement and navigating the complexities of post-pandemic education and learning gaps. By focusing on cultural inclusivity, innovative teaching, and teacher support, the school is well-positioned to continue its progress, though ongoing efforts will be needed to fully address the evolving landscape of family and educational dynamics.

The findings emphasize the importance of community partnerships, family involvement, effective communication, cultural inclusivity, and tailored academic support in education. Aligned with the national PTA standards, these themes highlight the need for welcoming all families, advocating for every child, sharing power, and fostering community collaboration. Utilizing the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.), the approach integrates diverse forms of capital, human, social, cultural, financial, political, and physical, to address challenges and promote equitable access, engagement strategies, and future initiatives aimed at enhancing educational outcomes in rural settings. The next section will answer research sub question one: How do leaders (i.e., superintendent and principal) describe family engagement resources, information about student growth (i.e., academic, social-emotional, general well-being), and meaningful communication with families?

Administrator Interviews – Categories and Themes

Each administrator interview was conducted in person. Interviews with the administrators were conducted individually using predetermined questions. Coding was done with an in vivo style method and using priori codes. Appendix M is a summary of the most important and prevalent themes and categories which emerged from administrator interviews aligned with the national PTA standards and the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.). The

table in Appendix M highlights the themes that guide family-school partnerships by emphasizing communication, inclusivity, and collaborative practices.

The administrator interview findings highlight key areas for fostering effective family and community engagement in education. The ten themes identified from the administrator interviews included: 1) Technology and Equity, 2) Family Engagement Strategies, 3) Cultural and Linguistic Sensitivity, 4) Effective Communication, 5) Feedback and Continuous Improvement, 6) Parent Involvement Challenges, 7) Student and Family Centered Approaches, 8) Building Trust and Relationships, 9) Innovative Engagement Practices, and 10) Leadership and Vision in Education. These themes reveal practical approaches administrators are adopting to foster stronger family connections and address existing gaps.

The administrators in this study recognize the need for equitable access to technology, ensuring all students can participate fully in today's digital learning environments. Initiatives like device lending and internet access support aim to bridge the digital divide. Superintendent Pine stated, "Equity is not giving everyone the same thing, it is giving each student what they need to succeed."

By implementing flexible, inclusive engagement strategies, administrators encourage all families to participate in their child's education. Options like varied event times and virtual attendance help build stronger school communities. Principal Reed stated, "Inclusive and flexible engagement options empower all families to be active participants in their child's education." Embracing cultural and linguistic diversity is central to making schools welcoming and inclusive for all families. The administrators in this study work to ensure practices reflect these values, creating environments where families feel valued. Superintendent Pine shared, "Creating a welcoming school community means valuing and celebrating the diversity of every family."

Clear, consistent communication is key to fostering trust between schools and families. The administrators utilized various channels to keep families informed. Principal Reed shared, “The MyEducation Data platform has been a wonderful resource to share information with parents” (Trenholm & White, 2016). Feedback loops from parents, teachers, and students allow schools to adapt to evolving needs. The administrators in this study prioritize this ongoing improvement process. Superintendent Pine shared, “Our site councils are active at all buildings allowing parents to be involved.”

The administrators in this study understand the barriers that prevent some parents from participating and work to create flexible options for engagement. By doing so, they move from seeing parents as obstacles to viewing them as partners, echoing Superintendent Pine’s comment, “When we stop seeing parents as obstacles and start seeing them as partners, we open the door to meaningful collaboration in education.”

A focus on student-centered approaches allows schools to meet the unique needs of students and their families, empowering them to contribute to decision-making. This approach reflects the statement by Principal Reed, “When we prioritize the needs of students and invite families into the decision-making process, we create a community where every voice matters and every choice is made with purpose.” Building strong relationships based on trust is essential for meaningful family engagement. The administrators in this study prioritize open communication and respect, recognizing, as Superintendent Pine put it, “Trust is crucial to family engagement.”

The administrators in this study embrace innovative practices to keep family engagement relevant and responsive, using technology and creative scheduling to reach more families. As Principal Reed stated, “The investment in MyEducation Data has transformed our ability to connect with families, providing real-time insights and fostering a more transparent partnership.”

The administrators in this district inspire family engagement by modeling inclusive practices and setting a clear vision for collaboration. As Superintendent Pine shared, “When leaders prioritize inclusivity and actively welcome family voices, they set the stage for a school community where everyone feels valued and empowered to contribute.” These practices highlight the commitment by the administrators in this study to foster an inclusive, responsive school environment where every family feels valued and empowered to contribute to their student’s educational success.

Administrator Focus Group – Categories and Themes

The administrator focus group was conducted in person. The administrator focus group was conducted using predetermined questions. Coding was done with an in vivo style method and using priori codes. Appendix N is a summary of the most important and prevalent themes and categories which emerged from administrators focus groups aligned with the national PTA standards and the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.). The table in Appendix N highlights the themes that guide family-school partnerships as shared by administrators in this study.

The administrator focus group findings highlight key areas for fostering effective family and community engagement in education. The ten themes identified from the administrator focus groups included: 1) Educational Engagement, 2) Community and Cultural Engagement, 3) Organizational Practices and Crisis Management, 4) Technology, Innovation, and User Experience, 5) Parental and Family Support, 6) Communication and Feedback, 7) Resource and Funding Management, 8) Event and Activity Planning, 9) Data Analysis and Application, and 10) Operational and Organizational Communication. These themes reveal practical approaches administrators are adopting to foster stronger family connections and address existing gaps.

At the heart of any school is the commitment to fostering educational engagement, which is about sparking curiosity and inspiring lifelong learning. The administrators in this study emphasize the importance of creating interactive, relevant experiences that connect students with what they are learning. As Principal Reed stated, “When students feel engaged, they’re not just absorbing information they’re becoming active participants in their own learning journey.” This approach empowers students to take ownership of their education, making learning a meaningful and motivating experience that encourages growth both inside and outside the classroom.

Building a truly inclusive school means embracing the diverse cultural backgrounds within the community. These administrators are aware that recognizing and celebrating cultural diversity is crucial to creating a welcoming atmosphere. As Superintendent Pine stated, “When we recognize and celebrate our students’ cultural identities, we build bridges of understanding and respect.” This community and cultural engagement foster a sense of belonging and encourages families to actively participate in school life, creating a school environment that is both supportive and inclusive.

Effective organizational practices and a solid crisis management plan allow schools to navigate unexpected challenges with resilience. Proactive planning and adaptability are essential components of managing crises effectively. Superintendent Pine shared, “Having a solid crisis management plan in place means we can respond calmly and maintain stability, which is crucial for our students and staff.” By prioritizing preparation and responsiveness, the administrators in this study can sustain stability during difficult times, ensuring that learning continues, and the school community remains connected.

As technology becomes integral to the educational experience, schools are increasingly focused on implementing user friendly tools that support learning without adding complexity.

“The MyEducation Data platform is creating an opportunity for parents to see their whole child,” shared Principal Reed. By focusing on technology and innovation that prioritize user experience, the administrators in this study can enhance student learning, keep families connected, and support efficient school operations, ensuring that technology remains an asset rather than a barrier.

Family involvement is a cornerstone of student success, and schools recognize the importance of supporting parents and caregivers in their role. Principal Reed stated, “Providing resources and guidance to families empowers them to better support their children’s education at home.” Administrators in this study can offer workshops, resources, and guidance that reinforce the family-school connection, building a strong support network for each student and emphasizing the collaborative role families play in the educational journey.

Open, transparent communication and regular feedback are essential for building trust within the school community. Administrators in this study prioritize clear communication to create a culture where families feel valued and involved. As Superintendent Pine noted, “When we’re open with our families and listen to their feedback, we strengthen our partnership and make our school a place everyone feels invested in.” Through consistent communication and openness to feedback, the administrators in this study create an environment where parents and teachers work together to support student success.

Efficient resources and funding management is crucial to ensuring that every dollar directly benefits students and supports essential programs. Schools rely on careful budgeting and allocation to maximize their impact on students’ education. Superintendent Pine shared, “It’s my responsibility to ensure that every dollar is put to good use, supporting the programs and resources that make a difference in our students’ lives.” By managing resources responsibly,

administrators can create a sustainable environment that consistently supports student and staff needs.

Thoughtful event and activity planning fosters a sense of community and belonging, bringing together families, students, and staff. The administrators in this study recognize that inclusive events can build connections that strengthen the entire school community. “Planning activities that everyone can participate in builds a shared experience and strengthens our bond as a school,” Principal Reed explained. Events that engage all families create a welcoming school atmosphere and reinforce the importance of community involvement.

In the age of data-driven decision-making, schools are increasingly leveraging data to support student learning and tailor instructional strategies. “We don’t collect data just to have it; we use it to understand our students better and support their needs effectively,” stated Principal Reed. Administrators in this district use data to make informed decisions that enhance student outcomes and provide targeted support, ensuring each student has the resources they need to succeed.

Clear and consistent internal communication is the backbone of effective school operations. Ensuring that all teachers and administrators are aligned with the school’s goals and expectations creates a well-coordinated institution. As Superintendent Pine noted, “When we communicate effectively, we create an organized, cohesive environment where everyone understands their role.” Effective operational communication by administrators in this study ensures that each member of the school community can contribute to a collaborative, productive environment.

The themes of engagement, inclusivity, preparedness, innovative technology, family support, clear communication, efficient resource use, thoughtful events, data-driven decisions,

and internal coordination create a responsive, connected school community. The administrators in this study embrace these practices to enhance educational outcomes and community involvement.

Administrator – Overall Categories and Themes

The central categories and themes identified by administrators in this rural school setting to help answer the overarching research question focused on defining impactful family engagement practices at the middle school level. Appendix O highlights the overall six themes and 14 categories.

Theme 1: Equitable Access

Efforts to improve equitable access often center on language inclusivity, ensuring that all community members can engage fully regardless of linguistic barriers. Principal Reed highlighted the use of Timekettle earbuds as a step toward providing equity by addressing language needs. Superintendent Pine mentioned, "I'm learning how to use those. This provides an opportunity for us to be able to meet the needs for other languages." Beyond technology, a conscious effort has been made by administration to translate vital resources like websites and newsletters into Spanish to ensure accessibility. However, Principal Reed acknowledged the challenges, stating: "We've been very conscientious at trying to make that happen. Doesn't mean we're always successful. No. We've got twelve languages in the district, and we can't get every language available for everything needed." Despite these challenges, the administrators believe these efforts have strengthened partnerships with parents and the community. Superintendent Pine also expressed optimism that artificial intelligence could further improve equity and access by reaching more demographics. Superintendent Pine commented, "I'm hopeful AI [artificial intelligence] will help continue that a little bit because it has potential to help us reach some

other demographics that we can't always get to." This ongoing commitment demonstrates a strong focus on fostering inclusivity and equity through innovation and collaboration.

Theme 2: Challenges in Engagement

The challenges in engagement, particularly in small, rural communities, often stem from the difficulty of balancing personal and professional roles. Principal Reed noted, "we wear many hats," constantly switching between their professional duties and personal interactions. This dynamic often blurs the lines of privacy and is overwhelming. However, Principal Reed went on to say, these "small daily interactions" may serve as the only positive engagement that some individuals experience, making the role of community leaders crucial despite these challenges.

Another major issue is overcoming participation barriers. For example, low participation in efforts to gain feedback, like surveys, makes it difficult to gauge community needs. Moreover, Superintendent Pine stated, "there is a need to reach beyond the core group of parents who are regularly involved" in school or community activities to ensure that others feel welcome. In rural and Hispanic communities, additional barriers such as fear related to legal status can discourage families from fully participating in school life. Without a standardized approach to parent and community engagement, such as consistent outreach efforts or porch visits, fostering stronger connections remains a significant challenge according to administrator participants.

Theme 3: Family Engagement Approaches

Family engagement approaches require a nuanced understanding of the diverse needs of families, particularly when it comes to participation. Principal Reed shared an important strategy is "meeting parents where they are," which can be challenging due to varied circumstances. Also noted by Superintendent Pine, "the biggest challenge is every parent is in so many different places, and so trying to meet them where they're at can be really hard." Engaging families around

events they are already likely to attend, such as athletic games or migrant meetings, can create more opportunities for meaningful interaction. The idea is to connect with families in familiar settings and make participation as accessible as possible.

Scheduling for inclusivity is another key element in family engagement. Events held during typical work hours can be difficult for many parents to attend. Superintendent Pine pointed out the need for evening events, stating, "move it to the evening, and now parents will come. It's hard for parents to get off from eight to ten or nine to eleven or whatever that timeframe is." Flexibility in scheduling helps break down barriers, enabling more parents to engage in school activities and feel part of the community.

Leveraging existing events is also an effective way to increase participation. One administrator suggested using popular events as foundations for other engagement activities. For example, Principal Reed shared that by moving the science fair to the evening, schools can "build other things off of that because parents are in for that." By capitalizing on events that families are already attending, schools can maximize parent involvement and create additional opportunities for connection.

Theme 4: Communication Strategies

Effective family engagement hinges on consistent and inclusive communication that meets the needs of a diverse community. A weekly newsletter from MyEducation Data (Trenholm & White, 2016), translated into multiple languages, plays a crucial role in fostering such engagement. Principal Reed highlighted, "I think having a weekly newsletter that goes out has been successful. And the fact that it can be translated into languages that meet the needs of our community, whether it's English or Spanish, is a positive thing." Our migrant nights are also recognized for their success in bringing together people from various cultural backgrounds.

Superintendent Pine stated, "The migrant coordinator was actually having one event that brought many families in...and she can make connections with different cultures in the community as well." This underscores the power of these events. Additionally, extracurricular activities provide a valuable way to draw families in, contributing to a strong sense of community and positively impacting engagement by "trying to fill the stands," stated Principal Reed.

In a diverse community, differentiating communication based on language and platform preferences is essential. Offering information through multiple channels such as newsletters, social media, and in-person meetings ensures that families receive the same key messages. Superintendent Pine commented, "Being able to differentiate based off of languages becomes key, especially in our community, where we are so diverse." Transparency and a willingness to listen are also fundamental to building trust with families. "It has to be from a place...of transparency...a place that is meant to provide insights to their children and how they can help better support their kids," Principal Reed noted. The use of technology, such as Google Translate and Timekettle earbuds, helps meet the diverse needs of the community. Superintendent Pine shared, "We also use the MyEducation Data platform which supports families as well." By leveraging these tools and maintaining clear communication, family engagement can continue to thrive across various platforms and opportunities.

Theme 5: Future Initiatives

Future initiatives focus on expanding family engagement by incorporating successful past events and introducing new strategies. Principal Reed highlighted a misconception often seen in schools where "Older students' families wouldn't participate in such events." However, they believe that middle school families can still be drawn to engaging activities, particularly if they are themed events or tied to special occasions like holidays. These efforts could be combined

with initiatives such as the "power hour" to increase participation and ensure that older students' families feel included.

Principal Reed also emphasized the success of creative events, sharing the example of the "newspaper catwalk challenge," where students designed newspaper outfits. "It lasted maybe 20 minutes," Principal Reed explained, "but that would be a cool way to bring them in to watch their kids engaged." By showcasing student activities and adding a layer of fun, these types of events attract both students and families. Additionally, Principal Reed plans to implement family fun nights, quarterly assemblies, and a positive staff referral system to celebrate building-wide successes and strengthen community ties. Combining these successful models with new engagement strategies is key in increasing participation across all grade levels.

Both administrators suggested rethinking the timing and format of successful events could lead to greater engagement. As Superintendent Pine put it, "Let's take some things we're successful at, flip it at a time in a different location and add some things to it." This approach could involve integrating popular activities like middle school dances, or student showcases with informational sessions, to create a comprehensive event that appeals to students and their families alike.

Theme 6: Participatory Environment

Administrators in this study gained insight from attending a training session, learning about an idea to foster more participation in site councils by having students present to increase parent interest and attendance. The administration plans to implement this strategy, starting small and aiming to include diverse presenters. Reflecting on this example from another school, Principal Reed noted, "What I've decided to do is I now have students who sign up and want to present at the site council." By allowing students to present on various topics like e-sports,

yearbook, or digital life, they anticipate that "interested parents are wanting to come in and maybe build some of those relationships." This student-centered approach not only empowers students, but also creates a more engaging and collaborative atmosphere, where families feel more involved and connected to what students are learning and the school community.

Superintendent Pine stated, "understanding a child's emotional responses can lead to better outcomes during parent-teacher conferences." School and district leadership advocate for a more collaborative approach, moving beyond data to focus on what is best for the student. "We got to show this," Superintendent Pine said, but emphasized that ultimately, "what are we doing for kids and what can we do together to help reach kids" should drive the conversation. This aligns with a goal to foster meaningful partnerships with parents.

In addition to student-led conferences, where students discuss their own grades, attendance, and future educational interests, Principal Reed suggested showcasing students' "power hour" or passion projects during family events to increase community engagement. By allowing students to share their work, more opportunities for students to connect with the community exist.

Administrator – Overall Conceptual Framework Connections

The themes identified by administrators link to the national PTA standards to contextualize their role in promoting effective family-school partnerships. These standards, with their focus on welcoming all families, supporting student success, and collaborating with the community, intersect seamlessly with the thematic categories identified, such as communication strategies and participatory environments. Connections to the conceptual framework are further discussed by standard in the following section.

Standard 1: Welcome All Families

The administrators emphasized various efforts to ensure that all families feel welcome and included in the school community. Principal Reed highlighted this approach, stating, "We also have learned more about the technology that we actually have at our fingertips...whether that be the Google Translate or the Timekettle earbuds." Such actions support standard one which stresses the importance of welcoming all families by accommodating diverse cultural and linguistic needs. Additionally, Principal Reed noted the importance of differentiating communication methods: "Being able to differentiate based off of languages becomes key, especially in our community, where we are so diverse." The theme of parental and family support identified earlier connects to this standard by highlighting the importance of creating an inclusive and collaborative school environment.

Standard 2: Communicate Effectively

Effective communication aligns with national PTA standard two. Initiatives like weekly newsletters translated into multiple languages allow families to stay connected and engaged, thereby fostering trust and cooperation between the school and families. Superintendent Pine noted, "Every Friday, parents get an email and text from MyEducation Data with a summary to tell how their child is doing in each of their classrooms." Principal Reed added, "We try to do our best to provide translators, when necessary, whether that be at parent-teacher conferences or when we have a parent who comes into the office." Communicating effectively, as an identified theme, ensures administrators and the school are contributing in positive ways to engage families through trust and promoting inclusionary practices.

Standard 3: Support Student Success

Supporting student success through collaborative efforts with families directly reflects standard three. Programs like family challenges and family nights provide opportunities to be actively involved in student academic and emotional development. Principal Reed shared, "Every month, I have a family challenge... trying to get the families to work together with the school." Moreover, by engaging families in student-led conferences, schools are ensuring that parents are part of the learning process. Principal Reed shared, "We have had 99% attendance at our parent-teacher conferences...and those two dates are huge."

Standard 4: Speak Up for Every Child

Advocating for every child, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds, not only upholds standard four, but also strengthens the voice of marginalized families in the school system. The school district in this study addressed the specific needs of non-English-speaking families and worked to understand cultural expectations that influence family engagement. Superintendent Pine remarked, "In the Hispanic realm, many parents assume that if they don't hear from the school, everything is fine." Additionally, schools introduced an English as Second Language (ESL) program to ensure that language was not a barrier to educational success. Principal Reed noted, "We have an ESL teacher who provides individual attention to new students in grades 7-12...to help with the challenges they face."

Standard 5: Share Power

Efforts to share decision-making power with families, such as through site council demonstrate a commitment to standard five. These structures allow families to participate in decisions that affect the school, creating a more inclusive and equitable environment. Principal Reed mentioned, "We have a site council that is open to any parent...to learn about how we can

support the students." Additionally, schools are working to expand opportunities for parent engagement through events like parent nights: "We're going to start with one parent night per semester to get more parents involved in the decision-making process," Principal Reed shared. This fosters a shared sense of responsibility by involving families in school governance.

Standard 6: Collaborate with the Community

Collaborating with community partners to support the school's local onsite school market illustrates standard six and strengthens opportunities to leverage external resources to meet the needs of students and families. These partnerships ensure that families facing economic challenges have access to essential goods, such as food, clothing, and hygiene products. "We have a local market...a non-profit organization that provides food, clothing, hygiene needs, pretty much any basic survival needs for kids," Principal Reed noted. Furthermore, community partners also support student activities. Principal Reed shared, "We asked community partners to sponsor a student reward movie event, using donated funds to provide this opportunity for our students." These collaborations enhance the school's ability to connect families with community resources that support student success.

Administrator – Overall Theoretical Framework Connections

Equitable access ensures that all community members, regardless of language or background, can fully participate in and benefit from available resources and opportunities. Efforts to provide equitable access, particularly through addressing language barriers and desires for increased activities, enrich the community's cultural and social capitals. Addressing language barriers with multilingual resources and technology supports the cultural capital by preserving and respecting the diverse identities within the community. This initiative not only fosters inclusivity but also strengthens the shared knowledge and traditions that define the community.

Simultaneously, efforts to increase activities enhance social capital by building robust networks and relationships, facilitating cooperation and mutual support among community members.

Engaging community members in small, rural areas involves navigating unique challenges that stem from the close-knit nature of these communities. In small, rural communities, challenges such as balancing roles and overcoming participation barriers are tied to social and human capital. The overlapping of personal and professional roles requires strong social capital, as these close-knit relationships are pivotal in managing community dynamics effectively. Addressing participation barriers by engaging individuals beyond the usual participants enhances human capital. Broader community involvement fosters the development of new skills, increases educational opportunities, and contributes to the overall well-being of the community.

Effective family engagement in schools involves employing strategies that recognize and respond to the unique needs of the community. Family engagement strategies that include encouraging diverse participation, scheduling for inclusivity, and leveraging existing events primarily enhance social, cultural, and physical capitals. Diverse participation strengthens social capital through enriched community relationships, while scheduling events to accommodate cultural diversity honors and integrates the community's cultural capital. Leveraging existing infrastructure for events utilizes physical capital efficiently, maximizing the community spaces for inclusive family engagement.

Leveraging strategic communication practices can significantly boost community engagement and trust. Enhancing communication through multilingual resources, technology, and transparency enriches cultural, physical, and political capitals. Effective communication that respects cultural diversity strengthens cultural capital, ensuring that every community member

feels acknowledged. Utilizing technology to bridge communication gaps optimizes physical capital by enhancing the community's infrastructure. Emphasizing transparency in communication and decision-making processes enhances political capital by fostering an environment where community members feel empowered to influence decisions that affect them.

Looking ahead, future-focused initiatives play a vital role in shaping community growth and resilience. Future initiatives by school leaders focus on adapting successful models and introducing new engagement strategies connected to human and social capitals. These initiatives aim to continuously develop the community's human capital by providing educational and developmental opportunities. Strengthening social capital through innovative engagement strategies ensures sustained cooperation and mutual support, which are critical for enduring community enhancement and effective engagement.

Fostering a participatory environment is essential for building a more inclusive and dynamic educational community. Creating a participatory environment through student-led initiatives and empowering parent input primarily boosts human and political capitals. This approach engages students in active learning and decision-making, enhancing their educational outcomes and skills (human capital). It also empowers families by giving them a voice in educational governance, thereby strengthening the community's political capital and fostering a sense of ownership and involvement in school processes.

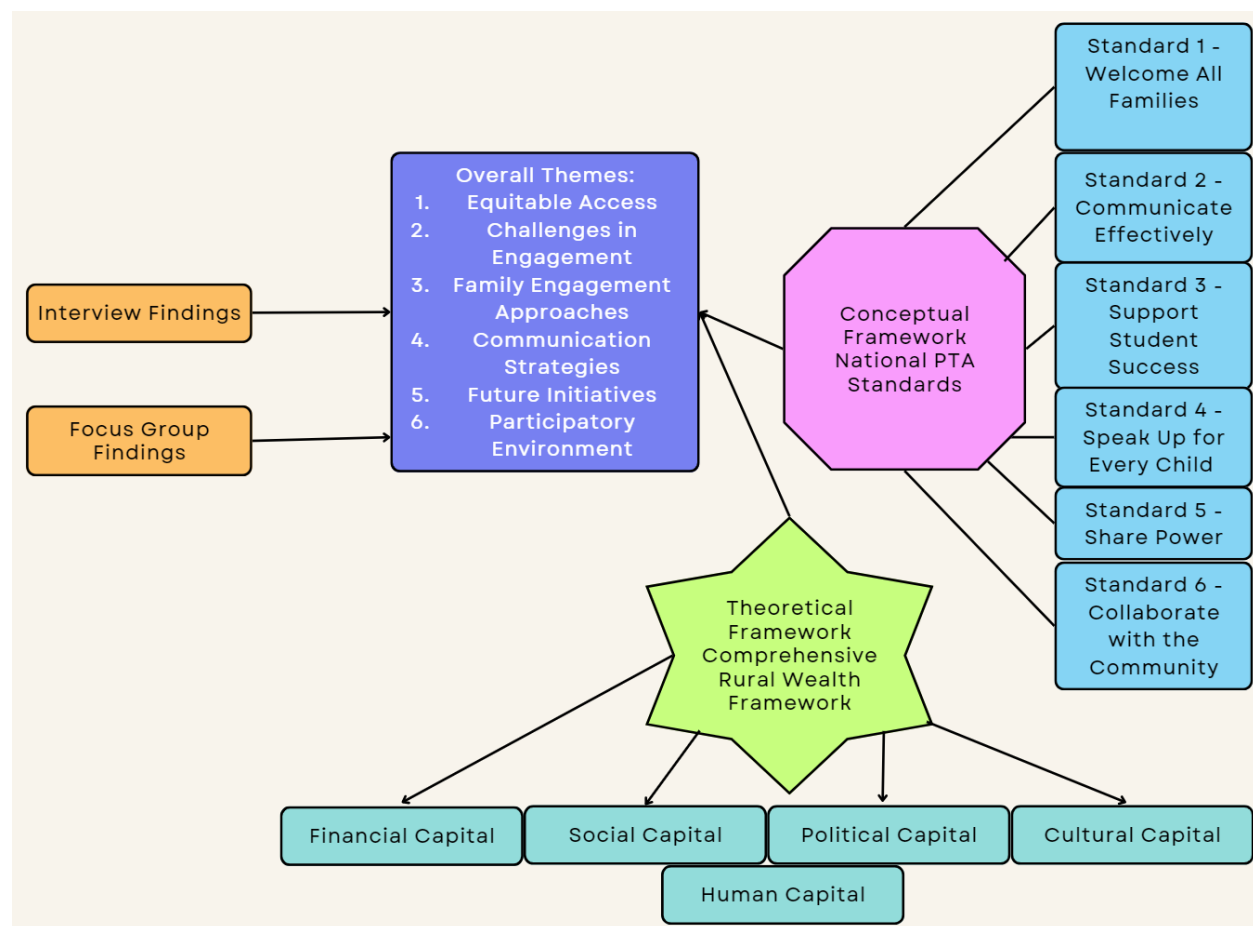
By focusing exclusively on the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.), these themes highlight the ways in which school leaders can impact community capital, to leverage and enhance a more inclusive and engaged educational environment.

Summary of Administrator Findings

Figure 2 connects interview and focus group findings with overarching themes aligned to the national PTA standards highlighting effective communication, support, advocacy, and collaboration. Additionally, it links the overarching themes to the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.), highlighting the interaction between various forms of capital (financial, social, political, cultural, and human) in educational administration leadership.

Figure 2

Administrator Overall Data Collection and Findings



Efforts to enhance family and community engagement in educational settings are multifaceted and focused on addressing specific challenges such as language barriers, participation hurdles, and the balancing of roles in rural communities. Administrators are

utilizing innovative tools like real-time translation devices and multilingual resources to ensure equitable access and improve communication strategies. Engaging families effectively involves accommodating diverse schedules, leveraging popular community events, and employing technology to meet varied communication preferences. Future initiatives aim to build on successful past activities by introducing creative and thematic events that attract broader participation. A key strategy includes empowering students to take active roles in community engagements, which not only increases parent interest, but also fosters a more inclusive and participatory environment. These combined efforts demonstrate a strong commitment to fostering inclusivity, enhancing communication, and strengthening community ties within the educational sphere.

Connecting with the national PTA standards and the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.) provides a structured yet flexible approach to enhancing community involvement and parent engagement. By aligning school initiatives with these frameworks, schools can systematically address the diverse needs of their communities and actively involve parents in meaningful ways. This integration not only strengthens social and physical capital, but also fosters a sense of ownership and participation among parents and community members as defined in the national PTA standards. As schools implement these standards, administrators strive to cultivate a supportive network that not only boosts student success but also enriches the community's overall educational environment. This holistic approach exemplifies a commitment to leveraging every available resource to build a stronger, more inclusive educational landscape in rural schools. The next section will answer research sub question number three: How do parents describe family engagement resources, information about student growth (i.e., academic, social-emotional, general well-being), and meaningful communication with families?

Parent Interviews – Categories and Themes

Each parent interview was conducted in person. Interviews with the parents were conducted individually using predetermined questions. Coding was done with an in vivo style method and using priori codes. Appendix P is a summary of the most important and prevalent themes and categories which emerged from parent interviews aligned with the national PTA standards and the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.). The table in Appendix P highlights the themes that guide family-school partnerships by emphasizing communication, inclusivity, and collaborative practices, providing a roadmap for involving families more effectively in school environments.

The parent interview findings highlight key areas for fostering effective family and community engagement in education. The eight themes identified from the parent interviews included: 1) Family Engagement and Involvement, 2) Cultural Sensitivity and Inclusivity, 3) Communication Methods and Platforms, 4) Teacher Support-Academic Success, 5) Student Independence, 6) Academic Success and Student Needs, 7) Community Partnerships and Support, and 8) Event Participation. These themes reveal the practical approaches teachers are adopting to enhance connections and foster stronger relationships with families.

"When I see the school actively involving parents, I feel more connected to my child's education," stated Parent Sky. Parents in this study value opportunities to participate, as they believe it reinforces learning at home. When schools engage families, it fosters a supportive environment where students feel encouraged both at school and home.

"As a parent, it means so much to see our culture respected and celebrated at school," stated Parent Ocean. Parents in this study appreciated their school as it honors cultural diversity, and it creates an inclusive space for their students. Parent Forest noted, "When the school

celebrates our heritage, my child feels proud and accepted.” Emphasizing cultural sensitivity helps students feel respected, fostering a welcoming environment for all families.

Parents appreciate varied communication channels that keep them informed about school updates and events. Parent Star mentioned, “The MyEducation Data newsletters really help me stay up to date with everything going on.” By using this platform, the school ensures that families feel connected and included in their student’s school experience.

Parents in this study recognize the importance of well supported teachers in fostering student success. Parent Stone commented, “When teachers have the tools they need, it shows in how well they can help my child.” Supporting teachers directly impacts student learning, creating a positive academic environment that benefits everyone.

Parents in this study value the focus on student independence, as it builds essential life skills. Parent Meadow shared, “Watching my child learn to set goals and manage their work is amazing and it has helped them grow.” Parents appreciate that the school promotes independence which equips students with confidence and skills that extend beyond the classroom. Parents feel that personalizing education helps students reach their full potential. Parent Moon explained, “When teachers’ pay attention to my child’s unique strengths and challenges, it shows they really care.” Schools that tailor their approach to individual needs create an environment where each student can thrive.

Partnerships between schools and local organizations broaden opportunities for students. Parent Star remarked, “When local businesses get involved, it shows that our community cares about the future of our children.” Community partnerships provide resources and experiences that benefit families and strengthen the school community.

Middle school parents in this study feel more connected to the school when they participate in events. Parent Forest stated, “When we all come together, it feels like a big family, my kids love it, and so do I.” The parents in this study believed that events at this school foster school spirit and a sense of belonging, creating a warm and inclusive atmosphere that brings everyone together. As shared by parents, strong family-school partnerships, rooted in communication, inclusivity, and cultural respect, are essential for student success. Parents appreciate how their school engages them meaningfully and encourages student independence. These themes provide insight for schools working to create a welcoming, collaborative environment that benefits students, families, and the broader community.

Parent Focus Groups – Categories and Themes

Two parent focus groups were conducted for 7th grade parents and 8th grade parents in person. Each parent focus group was conducted using predetermined questions. Coding was done with an in vivo style method and using priori codes. Appendix Q provides a summary of the most important categories and themes from the 7th grade parent focus group and Appendix R captures the perspectives of parents in the 8th grade focus group. These appendices provide a summary of the most important and prevalent themes and categories emerging from parent focus groups aligned with the study’s conceptual and theoretical frameworks.

The 7th grade parent focus group findings highlight key areas for fostering effective family and community engagement in education. The four themes identified from the 7th grade parent focus group included: 1) Family Engagement, 2) Communication Effectiveness, 3) Educational Support, and 4) Inclusivity and Diversity. These themes underscore the importance of building strong, inclusive connections between families, schools, and the community to support students' educational journeys.

Parents in the focus group emphasized that engagement opportunities help them feel actively involved and connected to their children's learning. Parent Stone shared, "When the school invites us to participate, it shows that they value our input and see us as partners in education." Such engagement fosters a supportive relationship between families and the school, creating a cohesive environment for student growth.

Parents in this study appreciated consistent and transparent communication, especially through accessible platforms. Parent Star noted, "The MyEducation Data platform sends updates regularly so I know what's happening and how I can support my child's learning." Effective communication builds trust and allows parents to stay engaged, making it easier for parents in this middle school to support their student's educational journey.

Parents expressed gratitude for the school's commitment to providing educational support, particularly for students who may need additional assistance. Parent Sky commented, "When the school offers tutoring or study resources, it shows they care about each child's success." This support ensures that all students have access to the help they need to thrive academically.

Parents in the focus group emphasized the importance of inclusivity and the school's recognition of diverse cultures and backgrounds. Parent Forest remarked, "When the school respects and includes all cultures, my child feels proud of who they are." By fostering an inclusive environment, the school creates a space where every student and family feels valued and respected. By involving parents as partners, maintaining transparent communication, supporting students' learning needs, and fostering an inclusive environment, schools can create a supportive, connected community that values each family. Focusing on these areas strengthens

the bond between families and the school, ultimately benefiting students' educational journeys and fostering a sense of belonging.

The 8th grade parent focus group findings highlight key areas for fostering effective family and community engagement in education. The six themes identified from the 8th grade parent focus group included: 1) Family Engagement, 2) Communication, 3) Educational Support, 4) Policy Influence, 5) Inclusivity, and 6) Resource Access. These themes underscore the importance of building strong, inclusive connections between families, schools, and the community to support students' educational journeys.

Parents in this study appreciate it when the school actively encourages their involvement, as it fosters a stronger connection to their student's learning. Parent Meadow remarked, "When I'm invited to participate, I feel like a partner in my child's education." Family engagement strengthens the bond between home and school, creating a cohesive support system for student success. Consistent updates and accessible platforms keep parents informed. Parent Forest noted, "I feel much more prepared to support my child when the school shares timely information through the MyEducation Data system." Effective communication fosters trust and makes it easier for parents to stay engaged in their student's education.

Parents expressed appreciation for extra help available to students who may need it. Parent River shared, "The school's tutoring program has made a big difference for my child." Eighth grade parent participants were thankful that the school prioritizes educational support to ensure that all students have the tools they need to thrive academically. Furthermore, parents appreciated opportunities to offer input on school policies and decisions. Parent Moon explained, "Being invited to share my perspective makes me feel like our family's concerns are valued." Inclusive policy discussions build trust and allow families to contribute to the school.

When parents see diverse cultures recognized and appreciated, they feel a stronger connection to the school. Parent Sky noted, “It’s wonderful to see the school honor my child’s heritage and make them feel proud.” Inclusivity fosters a sense of belonging, making students and families feel seen and valued. Parents also recognized the importance of having various resources available, from academic materials to extracurricular support. Parent Forest commented, “When schools connect us with local resources, it makes a big difference in our ability to support our kids.” Ensuring resource access helps level the playing field, enabling all students to benefit fully from their education.

The 8th-grade parent focus group findings reveal essential areas for enhancing family and community engagement in education. By focusing on these areas, the school can foster a supportive environment where parents feel valued as partners, enriching students’ educational experiences and creating a welcoming atmosphere for all families.

Parent – Overall Categories and Themes

The parents’ descriptions of family engagement from interviews and focus groups provided an understanding of their dispositions, experiences, and perceptions important to this study. Appendix S outlines these key categories and themes from the combined sets of data for parents. The appendix showcases the overall eight themes and 16 categories.

Theme 1: Family Engagement and Involvement

Family engagement plays a crucial role in the educational experience, yet there is notable variability in how families participate in school activities. Many families express a desire for increased opportunities to engage with the school, emphasizing the importance of ongoing participation. Parent Sky believed that “the responsibility for engagement should not solely fall on the school.” Parent River argued “that families need to take the initiative to get involved, as

excessive efforts by staff to engage them can lead to burnout.” For instance, Parent Star “appreciates initiatives like the family game night challenge, which fosters non-technology-based interactions, and recognizes the value of parents visiting the school with prior notice.” However, these parents also felt that current school events are sometimes too complicated and suggested simpler activities could encourage more participation. Additionally, while the school has made strides in communication, especially through platforms like Facebook and MyEducation Data (Trenholm and White, 2016), there’s a sense that many families are already engaged at their own level, and that not all parents are willing or available to volunteer for specific requests. Ultimately, Parent Forest reflected on the need for balance, stating that “family involvement is about active participation and advocacy for one’s child, while family engagement should be a shared responsibility.”

Theme 2: Communication Methods and Platforms

Parent Ocean discussed a clear preference for digital communication methods and platforms, stating, "Texting is the easiest method for communication, as I’m unlikely to use email for such messages." Parent Stone appreciated the school's efforts to keep families informed, noting "the principal sends weekly newsletters with family challenges to encourage involvement and communication." However, Parent Moon shared that they also face challenges with technology, acknowledging that "many users struggle with using technology" and suggested some parents may not have access to some technology, while their student might. Parent Forest believed that "while the district does a good job posting information, there could be improvements in verbal communication," particularly for non-English speaking families who would benefit from "more translation and language support to ensure that all families feel welcome." Parent Sky and Parent Ocean did commend the school for its "support for non-

English speaking students" and highlighted that the communication system is "user-friendly and straightforward," allowing even less tech-savvy users to engage effectively. Yet, Parent Sky pointed out that "families find language barriers challenging" and suggested "phone calls are more effective than text messages," as many recipients may not know how to open links in texts. Balancing parental preferences for digital updates noting these challenges presents an ongoing consideration in parent interactions with the school.

Theme 3: Student Independence

Fostering student independence is crucial in promoting self-reliance among learners. Parent Star stated that this involves encouraging students to "take ownership of their learning journey" while providing support to "monitor their progress." Parent Forest believed that while extensive monitoring tools can feel like overkill, "it's essential for students to learn to manage their responsibilities independently." Parent Forest emphasized that "middle school is a pivotal time for children to take responsibility for their grades and communication, testing their interests and building crucial skills." This balance between support and self-sufficiency is vital, as students face the challenges of transitioning from dependence to independence. By instilling a sense of responsibility, students at the middle level develop the skills necessary to navigate these challenges and achieve their academic goals independently. Parent Moon reinforced that "learning often comes from making choices and facing the consequences."

Theme 4: Community Partnerships and Supports

A parent shared that there are ample opportunities for community involvement through volunteering and staying connected via Facebook, MyEducation Data (Trenholm & White, 2016), and weekly newsletters, although they acknowledged a potential bias due to their long-term ties to the community. Parent Ocean expressed concern that "the community does not

welcome new parents well,” citing its close-knit nature and resistance to change, particularly when it requires effort from existing community members. Additionally, Parent Ocean noted that “sometimes concerns raised by other parents lead to precautionary measures by the school,” which may seem unnecessary. However, Parent Stone stated the community generally does a good job of welcoming everyone, pointing out, “There are enough different activities to cater to various interests,” even if some negativity is unavoidable. Parents felt the size of the community allows for focused attention on students needing support and suggested forming a committee to brainstorm ways to enhance community support, such as raising awareness through sports events. While recognizing that efforts like food drives exist, Parent River emphasized that the community often lacks awareness of student needs, stating, “We don’t want kids to feel like charity cases.” Parent Moon highlighted community church as a valuable resource, particularly noting that newly retired individuals have time, but often lack connections. Parent Moon suggested, “We need to find ways to connect these individuals with community initiatives.” Ultimately, Parent Moon expressed a desire for greater cohesion, wishing for a way to bring everyone together and emphasizing the importance of “knowing one’s neighbors to foster a stronger sense of community.”

Theme 5: Teacher Support and Academic Success and Student Needs

Parent Meadow emphasized the benefits of living in a rural area, noting that “fewer students foster closer relationships” among families and educators. Parent Stone appreciated the school’s commitment to family engagement, particularly through “positive phone calls from teachers” and supportive interactions with coaches, which enhances communication and personal connections. The importance of keeping parents informed is evident, as parents value updates on student projects, while acknowledging the need for transparency regarding both positive and

negative aspects of a student's school experience. Despite occasional misunderstandings, such as a parent being upset about not receiving a call regarding a situation, Parent Meadow appreciated the open lines of communication, stating, "I feel comfortable approaching the teacher." Parent Sky expressed empathy for teachers facing pressures, noting, "It's positive that parents feel they can voice concerns." Moreover, Parent Sky believed that collaboration between schools and families is crucial for student success, asserting that "many students would achieve greater success at school if they had more support and accountability at home." Parent Sky also called for greater parental involvement in initiatives like the site council, stressing that while schools can initiate programs, "parents must take the initiative to engage actively."

Theme 6: Cultural Sensitivity and Inclusivity

Parent Stone described the school as "open and diverse," providing equitable access to resources regardless of economic status, race, or educational level. Parent Stone cited one school program as helpful in "ensuring kids have food over the weekend." However, Parent Star sought clarification on what is meant by "diverse populations" when asked about the school's initiatives for equitable access to resources. Parent Star also expressed concern that overemphasizing group distinctions among kids may prevent students from naturally learning to interact, stating that "creating special places for different groups gives kids an excuse to be unkind to each other."

As a lifelong resident and middle school staff member, Parent Forest discussed that it is part of their job to welcome new families by engaging them in conversations about their interests and backgrounds, whether they are "from Mexico or another state." Parent Forest highlighted that outreach, particularly to the Hispanic community, "may be insufficient," although they believed the person responsible for outreach is "very approachable" and does a good job of

making people feel welcome, especially because of the person's ability to speak Spanish and make personal connections within the community.

The middle school actively demonstrated respect for different cultural family backgrounds, with efforts noted by Parent River as "supporting military kids by having a countdown for when their mom was coming home." While Parent Meadow admitted they don't have direct interaction with some initiatives, they feel strongly inclusivity efforts are important. Parent Sky hoped for more "celebration and discussion of different cultures" and continued encouragement for children to openly share their cultural practices. Lastly, Parent Ocean expressed concern about the Hispanic community's influence, feeling stressed by the need to assimilate into the ways of others, which they believe "contradicts the country's foundational values."

Theme 7: Academic Success and Student Needs

Parental involvement plays a crucial role in a student's academic success, as it fosters a supportive environment both at home and school. As Parent Meadow mentioned, "many students would achieve greater success at school if they had more support and accountability at home." When parents actively engage in their student's education, it enhances student motivation, improves academic performance, and promotes positive attitudes towards learning. Parent Ocean believed that "collaboration between schools and families is imperative for the academic success and well-being of students," emphasizing the need for a united effort from both parties. Schools play a significant part in this process by offering various supportive measures such as open communication channels, parent-teacher meetings, and resources that encourage active participation. However, Parent Forest added that while schools can share programs and information, "parents generally lack in supporting their students," indicating a need for stronger

parental engagement. A collaborative approach between schools and parents is key to addressing student challenges and boosting overall success. Furthermore, as noted by Parent Stone, some students may require more direct "intervention and support at home" beyond what teachers can provide in the classroom.

Theme 8: Event Participation

Event participation plays a critical role in fostering a stronger school community. For example, Parent Moon recalled an incident where a child called their mom during a practice lockdown, causing unnecessary panic because the mom thought it was a real lockdown. This highlighted the need for "better communication with parents about such events," stated by Parent Moon. Additionally, the school organizes back-to-school nights for new students and incoming 7th graders to help them "understand what the school is about and feel welcomed," stated Parent Moon. Parent Forest shared their experience of a principal in Missouri who successfully organized science nights with "cool experiments in every classroom," which were monitored by teachers and enjoyed by students. However, managing event participation can be challenging, as some parents feel inadequate when they miss important events due to busy schedules or communication gaps. Parent Stone expressed frustration after missing a back-to-school event announcement because "they don't use Facebook." Overall, effective communication and scheduling strategies, such as aligning events with family schedules and cultural backgrounds, can help schools improve engagement and parent involvement throughout the academic year.

Parent – Overall Conceptual Framework Connections

Data collected from parent interviews and focus groups demonstrate a strong connection with the national PTA standards; whereby the themes align to the focus strands detailed in the six standards. The findings from parent interviews and focus groups shed light on critical points

derived from the themes that underscore the vital connections between family engagement strategies, school-community partnerships, and the broader national PTA standards conceptual framework. By aligning themes such as communication, inclusivity, and educational support with these established frameworks, the school can ensure that its efforts are both comprehensive and strategic. The national PTA standards provide a roadmap for fostering strong, meaningful relationships between schools and families and create a powerful lens through which schools can assess and improve engagement efforts and student success. Highlights from parent participants are shared in the following sections aligned to each standard.

Standard 1: Welcome All Families

Parents highlighted the importance of creating a welcoming environment for all families, noting that community involvement plays a crucial role in fostering inclusivity within the school. Parent Star stated, “Events like back-to-school nights, parent-teacher conferences, and newsletters are valuable tools for encouraging participation and helping new students and families feel integrated into the school community.” Some parents expressed that, compared to their elementary experiences, middle school could sometimes feel less welcoming, creating a perceived gap in engagement. Parent Stone appreciated, “initiatives like family game night challenges featured in newsletters, which encourage non-technology-based interactions, supporting family bonding.” Parent Stone also observed that many parents, although interested in engagement, “prefer to take the initiative themselves rather than relying solely on school staff, which helps prevent burnout among educators.” Furthermore, Parent Stone, “believes that family engagement should be a shared responsibility, suggesting that families have ample opportunities to connect with the school but should also take proactive steps to participate.” These combined efforts to foster inclusivity and support a balanced approach to engagement strengthen the

connection between families, schools, and the wider community, ensuring everyone feels valued and included.

Standard 2: Communicate Effectively

Parent River stated “digital communication platforms such as newsletters and text messages” are important for continued parent involvement. Using the MyEducation Data platform (Trenholm & White, 2016) increases communication accessibility. Challenges arise with social media and technological learning curves, but the overall preference for efficient, digital systems was highlighted. Parent Meadow also suggested improvements, such as “brief bilingual texts for recurring communication,” which enhances accessibility for families facing language barriers.

Technology is a recurring challenge, especially for parents who are not tech-savvy. While some parents find tools like Google Translate and technology aids effective, others struggle, indicating a gap in equitable access. This challenge impacts the effective use of communication platforms, but the school’s efforts to assist, including using text messaging as an alternative to complex tools, show an attempt to address these barriers.

The strong preference for personal interactions like phone calls and weekly newsletters underscores the value placed on relational wealth between teachers and parents. Parent Forest praised “quick email responses and personal communications,” emphasizing that building rapport and trust via direct contact fosters a stronger relationship. The school’s effort in sending out text reminders and providing feedback through high fives and personal phone calls reflects an investment in this relational wealth.

Several parents mentioned the tension between providing support and fostering student independence. Parent Ocean discussed that “there are plenty of communication opportunities, but

I believe that middle school students should take responsibility for their grades and communication.” A challenge at the middle level is recognizing the need to balance monitoring that might hinder a student's ability to become self-reliant, with external monitoring tools that encourage student independence.

Parent Sky highlighted that, “families who don’t speak English or are unfamiliar with technology find it challenging to stay informed.” The school’s use of interpreters, iPads, and translation services provide equitable access, aligning with the concept of improving communication across diverse communities. This inclusion of technology to support non-English speaking students strengthens the overall equity in access to communication resources for parents and students alike. Parents see how communication technologies, parental involvement, and student independence intersect to foster an environment aimed at equitable educational support and family engagement at the middle level.

Standard 3: Support Student Success

One parent highlighted the importance of finding a balance between supporting student success and fostering independence. Parent Meadow expressed concern that extensive monitoring systems might hinder students' ability to learn responsibility and stated, "I kind of feel like it's overkill because I feel like they need to figure that out on their own.” At the same time, Parent Meadow understood the challenge schools face in "trying to encourage... those good habits" while allowing students to grow in self-reliance. Parent Stone strongly believed that students should be responsible for their own academic progress, highlighting the need for students to take initiative. "I want my son to be responsible for his information. I want him to have to communicate with me and his teachers," Parent Stone stated.

This perspective is particularly relevant during the middle school years, which parents view as a crucial time for students to transition from relying on their parents to managing responsibilities independently. "Middle school is so hard... it's that awkward in-between phase where they've got to start growing up," Parent Meadow observed. For Parent Meadow, fostering independence was essential, and this parent prefers to allow their child to handle academic challenges directly. "I don't want to be tracking my kid's grades weekly...by the time they're in middle school, I want them to be doing those things on their own," Parent Meadow shared. This parent also acknowledged the challenges of this approach, noting that some parents in the community might prioritize immediate help over teaching long-term self-sufficiency, which can make balancing support difficult.

In addition, Parent Star shared the importance of family involvement, particularly in reinforcing discipline and accountability at home. Parent Star shared that many students would benefit from more consistent support from their families. "There's a lot of kids that if they had more support at home, they would be way more successful at school," Parent Forest shared. Despite feeling that schools are sometimes overburdened; parents appreciated the efforts of teachers and staff in providing resources and communication. "The school can do a lot... but parents have to take the initiative too," Parent Ocean reflected, acknowledging that while the school provides necessary information, students still need reinforcement from home to stay on track.

Standard 4: Speak Up for Every Child

Parent River highlighted the critical role of advocacy for every child through community partnerships and support, particularly when collaborating with local organizations. Parent Star shared a personal story of a friend moving closer to access the school's strong support for her

autistic son, reflecting the importance of partnerships in providing specialized resources. "I knew that her son would get what he needed because our school provides that very well." This parental perspective emphasized how such collaboration can significantly improve outcomes for students with diverse needs and demonstrates how schools, when aligned with community efforts, can ensure that no child is left without adequate support.

In addition, Parent Star also noted, "that resistance to change within the community can be a challenge to expanding or adapting essential partnerships." Parent Star described a philosophical difference in the community regarding whether the focus should be on providing immediate help or fostering long-term self-reliance in students. Additionally, Parent Star touched on cultural sensitivity and inclusivity, indicating that, "some students need more direct intervention and support." While inclusivity is a key concern, Parent Star believed "the school's existing partnerships are well-positioned to address these needs, provided the community is willing to embrace necessary changes."

Standard 5: Share Power

One parent discussed the importance of balance between school support and student responsibility in ensuring academic success and believed that students need to take ownership of their learning, especially at middle school. "By the time they're in middle school, I want them to be doing those things on their own without parent interference," Parent Stone explained. This reflects the idea of power sharing where both the school and the student work together, with the student taking the lead in managing their academic progress and responsibilities.

While advocating for student independence, Parent Forest also acknowledged the "significant, supportive measures schools provide to help students succeed." Parent Forest praised the school's communication efforts, explaining, "The staff and the teachers go above and

beyond to make sure that the kids are doing what they need to be doing." This collaboration between students, teachers, and parents forms the foundation of shared responsibility for academic success. Parent Moon believed that the school created plenty of opportunities for engagement, but it's ultimately "on the families themselves" to take advantage of those opportunities.

Another parent highlighted the difference between event participation and true engagement. Parent Meadow explained event participation as simply showing up to events like sports games, whereas family engagement involves a more active, ongoing interest in the student's daily activities and progress. Parent Meadow shared, "Engagement would be you're there on Friday night, but then every night after practice, you're asking... how practice was." Additionally, Parent Meadow appreciated specific initiatives like family game night challenges, which foster interaction beyond technology, stating that it encourages families to "interact more with their kids and play games that aren't TV-based."

This connection between school-organized events and family engagement further supports the importance of parental involvement, with parents acknowledging that while schools provide the framework, it's up to parents to fully engage, Parent Sky stated, "There's so much the school can do before the parent actually has to sit and do it."

Standard 6: Collaborate with the Community

Community collaboration and family engagement are essential elements in building strong, interconnected networks that foster a sense of belonging and support. Parent Forest discussed that, "by encouraging family involvement and offering increased opportunities for activities, local organizations and schools can enhance the sense of community." These activities allow families to actively participate in the growth and development of their communities. As

Parent Sky stated, "When families are involved, it creates a ripple effect of positive change."

This engagement not only strengthens relationships, but also encourages a collective responsibility for the success of community initiatives.

In addition, Parent Forest noted, "organizations can provide a powerful way to increase efforts for community development." Collaboration with these organizations offers valuable resources and support, ensuring that events are well-attended and impactful. As expressed by Parent Ocean, "Our partnerships allow us to expand our reach and offer more opportunities for community engagement." Parent Ocean went on to share that "these efforts lead to more robust event participation and increased engagement, providing multiple avenues for families and individuals to become involved, creating a cycle of sustained community growth."

Parent – Overall Theoretical Framework Connections

The data provides nuanced insight into how various themes in family and community engagement strategies align with the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.), emphasizing the development of social, physical, human, and cultural capital within the educational context.

Family engagement and communication methods are strongly tied to social and physical capital. Variability in family involvement and the desire for more activities underscore the importance of social capital in forming networks that enable collective action and enhance community bonding, which is essential for welcoming all families and collaborating with the community. Meanwhile, the preference for digital communication and the associated technological challenges highlights the importance of physical capital, pointing to the need for infrastructure that supports effective communication.

Student independence and teacher support reflect the critical role of human capital in the educational framework, focusing on the skills, knowledge, and personal attributes that enhance individual and collective capacity. Encouraging self-reliance and recognizing teacher efforts both aim to bolster the capabilities that support student success and collaborative power dynamics between teachers and parents.

Community partnerships and cultural sensitivity illustrate the interplay between social and cultural capital. Collaboration with local organizations enhances social capital by fostering community networking; while addressing resistance to change and inclusivity concerns taps into cultural capital by influencing norms and values that shape behaviors and expectations. These elements are crucial for speaking up for every child and ensuring that diverse community resources are integrated effectively. Finally, event participation reiterates the significance of social capital, where engaging families in school events creates a ripple effect of positive change, strengthening community bonds and enhancing collective responsibilities. Overall, these connections highlight how various capitals within the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.) are pivotal in building a robust educational environment that fosters meaningful engagement and supports diverse community needs as perceived by parents in this rural middle school.

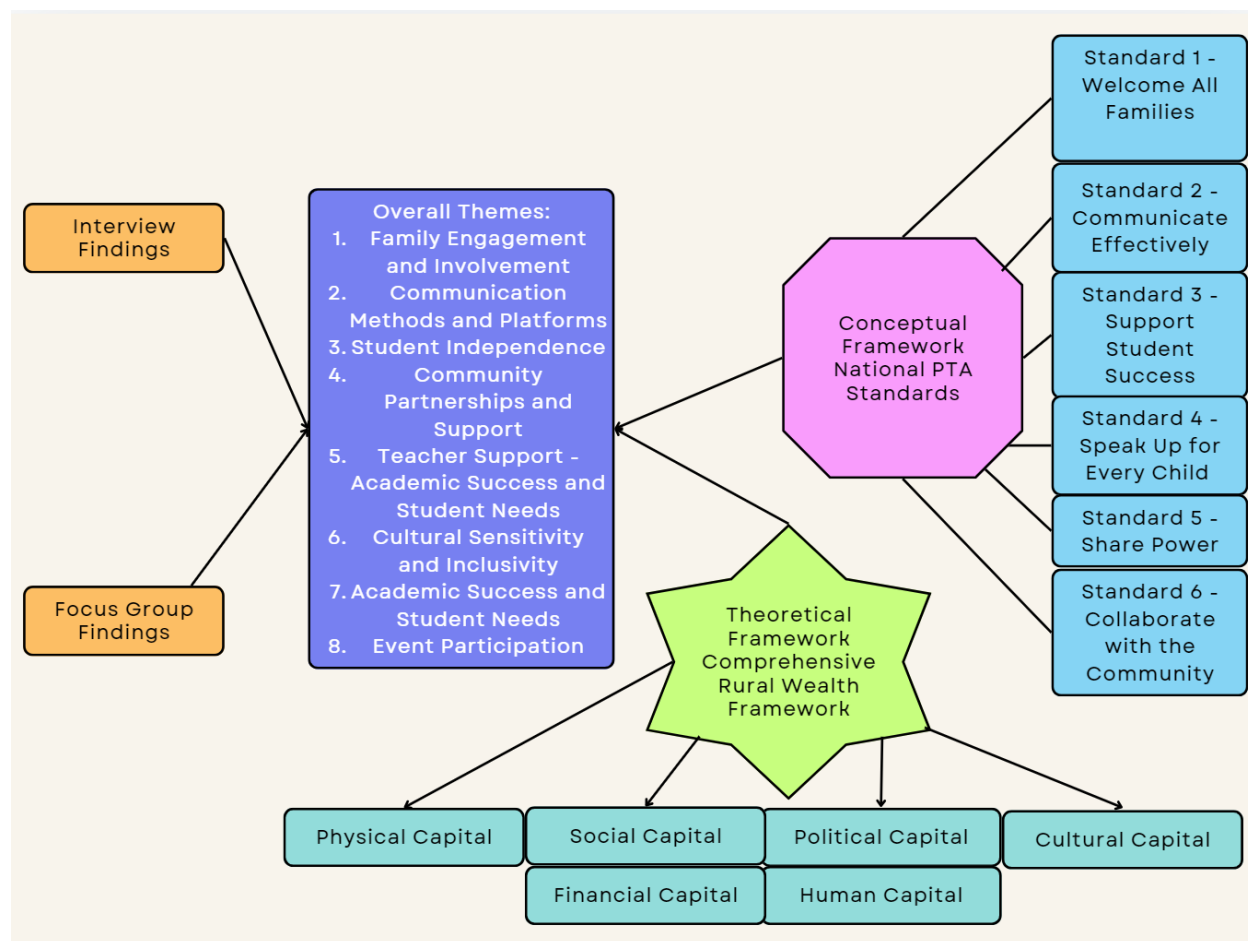
Summary of Parent Findings

Figure 3 outlines data collected from parent interviews and focus groups, connecting these insights to the national PTA standards and the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.). It identifies key themes such as family engagement, communication methods, student independence, and cultural inclusivity. Additionally, it maps these themes across various capital types in the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.), emphasizing the

importance of integrating social, cultural, and human capital to bolster community support and student success.

Figure 3

Parent Overall Data Collection and Findings



The analysis across eight thematic areas highlights significant insights into the dynamics of school-community engagement from the perspective of parents. Key findings indicate a strong desire among families for increased activities and improved digital communication, though challenges such as technological access persist. Encouraging student independence is vital, with a need for balanced support to foster self-reliance. Community partnerships show potential for enriching student experiences, despite some resistance to change. Appreciation for teacher efforts is evident, as well as the necessity for continuous communication between parents and

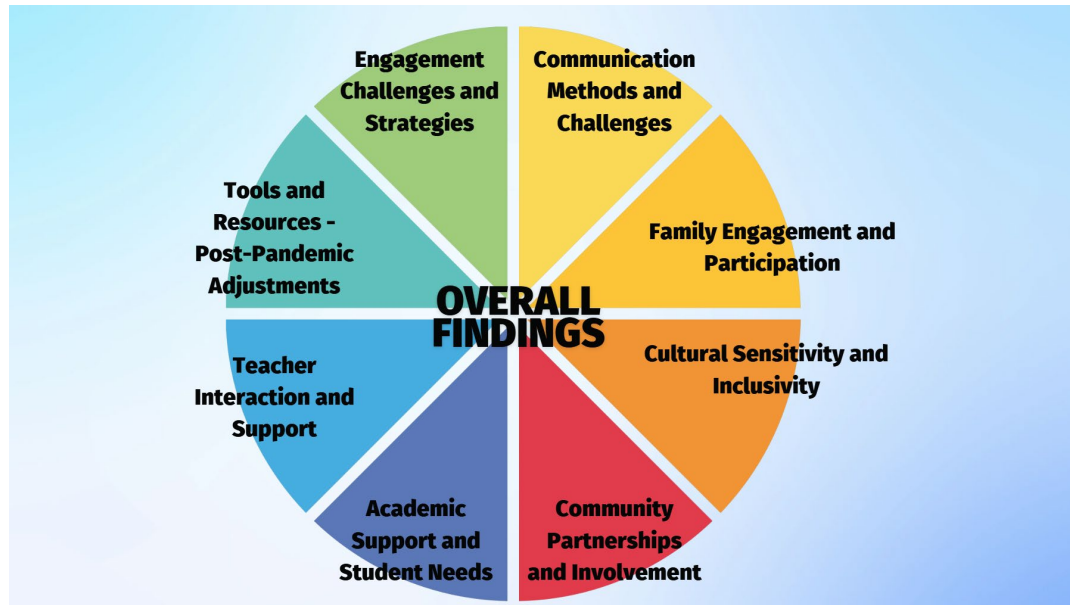
educators to bolster academic success. Cultural sensitivity and inclusivity remain crucial, with a call for more comprehensive outreach and celebration of diverse cultures. Parental involvement is paramount for academic success, necessitating more robust engagement strategies. Finally, event participation underscores the importance of inclusive communication to ensure all parents can engage with school events effectively. Together, these themes emphasize the need for strategic improvements in communication, inclusivity, and community engagement to enhance the educational landscape. The next section will answer research sub question number four: What can we learn about family engagement practices from the national PTA standards and the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework to strengthen family-school partnerships?

Summary of All Stakeholder Groups

Figure 4 is a summary of the most important categories and themes intersecting across all stakeholder groups. Each theme is analyzed through both the national PTA standards and the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.), highlighting the overall eight themes. In addition, Appendix T provides a more detailed summary of the most important and prevalent themes and categories which emerged across all stakeholder groups aligning to the national PTA standards and the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.).

Figure 4

Overall Findings All Stakeholder Groups



Theme 1: Communication Methods and Challenges

This theme focused on communication in a post-pandemic world, highlighting the shift to digital platforms and the challenges associated with language barriers. Participants expressed a clear preference for receiving updates through digital means. However, language barriers continue to hinder effective communication, particularly for non-English speakers. In addressing communication methods and challenges, all groups recognized the increasing preference for digital updates as essential for effective communication, particularly in the context of ongoing digital shifts post-pandemic. Participants universally agreed on the benefits of the use of the MyEducationData (Trenholm & White, 2016) platform in facilitating accessible and inclusive communication. The shift to digital platforms, while broadly supported, revealed differences in readiness and accessibility, with some groups highlighting stronger needs for infrastructural support in rural areas compared to others.

Theme 2: Family Engagement and Participation

The theme of family engagement and participation highlights the varied ways stakeholders perceive and participate in school and community activities. Teachers and

administrators often viewed engagement as formal, school-led activities, while parents preferred more flexible, accessible opportunities that respect their time constraints and diverse needs. Although school events were seen as a key avenue for fostering engagement, significant barriers, particularly in technology access, hindered some families' involvement, especially those lacking necessary devices or digital skills. Participants voiced a strong desire for more inclusive and varied engagement options, which could help bridge these gaps and promote equitable family involvement. In under-resourced areas, technology was highlighted as essential to support widespread participation, addressing both logistical and engagement concerns across all groups.

Theme 3: Cultural Sensitivity and Inclusivity

The importance of cultural sensitivity and inclusivity was a shared priority. All stakeholders stressed the need for schools to respect diverse cultural norms and support non-English-speaking families, enhancing rural community relationships. This theme highlights the need for respect and sensitivity towards diverse cultural backgrounds, with language services commonly proposed as a solution to overcome linguistic challenges, ensuring that all families could participate fully. Cultural sensitivity and inclusivity emerged as central themes, with all groups emphasizing the importance of language services and respect for cultural norms to create an inclusive environment. However, approaches to implementing these services varied, with administrators having more established systems for cultural integration. This variation emphasized the need for tailored strategies that consider the specific cultural landscapes of rural communities.

Theme 4: Community Partnerships and Involvement

Community partnerships and involvement are essential for supporting families and schools. Participants highlighted the importance of partnerships between the community and

schools, with an emphasis on collaboration to provide necessary resources. Regarding community partnerships and involvement, there was a unanimous view on the value of community-school collaboration to enhance resource availability and support educational initiatives. While all groups recognized the importance of leveraging community strengths, differences were noted in the existing levels of community engagement, with some parents believing that some community members are more reluctant to change due to their historic ties with the community.

Theme 5: Academic Support and Student Needs

This theme focused on the importance of parental involvement in students' academic journeys. Participants emphasized the need for differentiation to accommodate diverse learning needs, ensuring that all students receive the support they require. Emotional support during conferences was also highlighted as a crucial component of the overall academic support system, creating a more empathetic and effective dialogue between parents and educators. Academic support and student needs were areas where all participant groups acknowledged the critical role of parental involvement in addressing diverse student learning. Additionally, many parents expressed a desire for more robust support in navigating special education services, emphasizing the need for clearer communication and resources to better advocate for their children's unique learning needs.

Theme 6: Teacher Interaction and Support

Teacher-parent communication is essential in building a supportive educational environment. Participants expressed appreciation for teachers who actively engage with parents, highlighting the significance of regular communication. Additionally, the need for recognizing and supporting teachers in their efforts was evident, showing how crucial it is to value the

contributions of educators in maintaining a positive school environment. Teacher interaction and support were universally valued across all discussions, with a strong consensus on the need for regular and meaningful teacher-parent interaction. Appreciation for teacher efforts was a common sentiment, but the groups differed in how well they felt the community recognized and supported teachers.

Theme 7: Tools and Resources – Post-Pandemic Adjustments

In the post-pandemic era, the utilization of educational apps and communication tools has transformed the way schools and families interact. Participants noted how the adoption of these tools has streamlined communication and enhanced the educational experience. However, it was also emphasized that ongoing support and adjustments are necessary to ensure these tools remain effective and accessible to everyone. All groups agreed on the effectiveness of these tools in enhancing communication and educational outcomes. However, there were discrepancies in access to these tools, with some groups calling for more significant enhancements in infrastructure to support effective use. All stakeholder groups highlighted the use of the MyEducation Data (Trenholm & White, 2016) platform to support parent engagement. This resource allows parents access to student attendance, grades, and test scores all in one place.

Theme 8: Engagement Challenges and Strategies

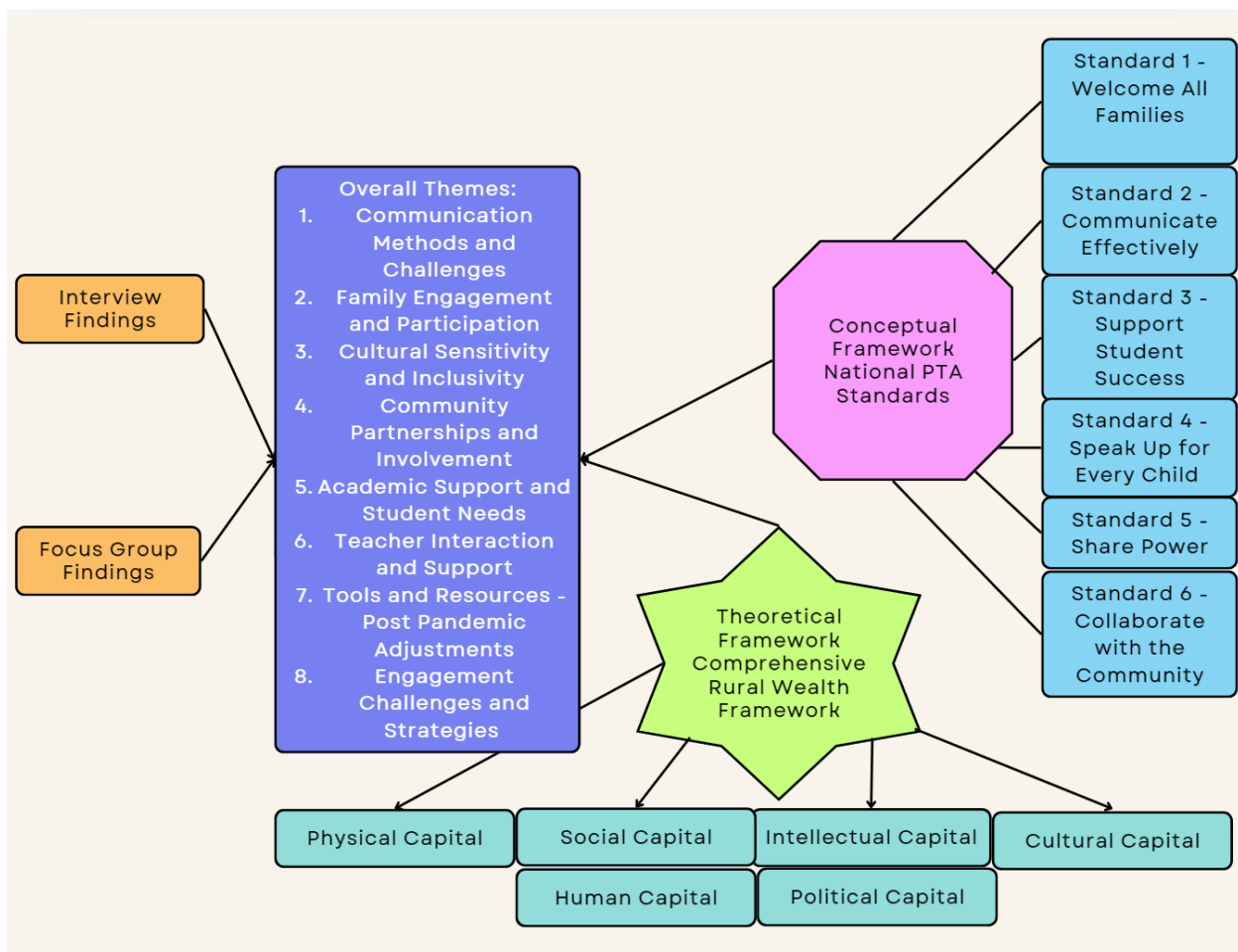
Overcoming barriers to participation remains a significant challenge, yet all stakeholder groups emphasized the importance of family engagement in driving student success. Stakeholders shared various strategies to adapt engagement methods to meet diverse community needs, ensuring that all families, regardless of circumstances, remain engaged in the educational process. Initiatives like student-led conferences were highlighted as effective in strengthening school-family collaboration and fostering meaningful engagement across the community.

Culminating Findings with Conceptual and Theoretical Framework Connections

Figure 5 represents the connections with the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.) and national PTA standards from all interviews and focus groups across all stakeholder groups - administrators, teachers, and parents.

Figure 5

All Stakeholders Overall Data Collection and Findings



This figure represents the themes synthesized to be most representative of all three stakeholder groups in promoting impactful family engagement practices at the middle school level in a rural school district. The data reveals how the post-pandemic environment has impacted communication, family engagement, and academic support, highlighting how these

themes are intertwined with the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework and the national PTA Standards.

Physical wealth is reflected in the digital and physical resources required to support communication platforms like MyEducation Data (Trenholm & White, 2016). While this digital infrastructure enhances access, it also highlights barriers some families face regarding technology access and proficiency. This directly aligns with Standard 1: Welcome All Families by ensuring the physical and technological resources are accessible to all families, helping them feel invited and included, regardless of their technological skills.

Social wealth emphasizes the importance of trust-based relationships between schools and families, essential for effective family engagement. This reinforces Standard 2: Communicate Effectively, as building these relationships fosters open, two-way communication, ensuring families feel heard and valued. Schools have adjusted their communication methods, focusing on inclusivity and overcoming language and technology barriers, further promoting the communication standard.

Human wealth, which includes the skills, knowledge, and emotional investments of families and educators, ties to Standard 3: Support Student Success. Culturally sensitive engagement practices, including providing language services, ensure that all families can support their student's academic journey. By enhancing the human wealth of the school community through professional development and family outreach, schools can better equip families to participate in their student's education.

Intellectual wealth emerges through shared learning and knowledge exchange between families, schools, and the community. The use of MyEducation Data (Trenholm & White, 2016) reflects a commitment to empowering families with the information they need to support their

children's success, aligning with Standard 3. This also highlights Standard 6: Collaborate with the Community, as community partnerships enhance the resources and knowledge available to support student growth and family engagement.

Political wealth is reflected in Standard 4: Speak Up for Every Child and Standard 5: Share Power. By giving families a voice in decision-making processes and school policies, schools empower parents to advocate for their children's needs. When schools share power with families, it ensures a more equitable and democratic environment where all stakeholders have a say in shaping school policies and practices, thereby aligning with political wealth and the national PTA standards of advocacy and shared governance.

Cultural wealth is woven throughout the engagement strategies, particularly through Standard 1: Welcome All Families and Standard 6: Collaborate with the Community. Schools are mindful of diverse cultural norms and values, making engagement practices more inclusive. Culturally responsive initiatives such as language services and culturally sensitive events demonstrate a respect for the cultural wealth that families bring to the school community, promoting an environment where all families feel welcome and included.

In response to these challenges and wealth dimensions, there has been an expansion of family engagement resources. The MyEducation Data platform (Trenholm & White, 2016), designed to be inclusive, provides all families, regardless of their technological proficiency or language skills, with access to essential information and participation opportunities. Effective engagement practices have included culturally sensitive initiatives that respect various cultural norms, directly supporting Standard 1 and Standard 6.

Community-school collaborations, fundamental to social and human wealth, are vital in supporting Standard 6: Collaborate with the Community. These collaborations support student

growth by sharing resources that bolster academic interventions and emotional support systems. Tailoring these interventions to meet the diverse needs of students is essential for promoting balanced and continuous development, a principle of Standard 3: Support Student Success. These partnerships are foundational in creating a supportive network that enhances educational outcomes for all students.

The synthesis of themes from the different stakeholder groups emphasizes a unified approach to enhancing family engagement practices, directly aligning with the National PTA Standards. Leveraging digital tools (physical and intellectual wealth) broadens the capacity of schools while improving inclusivity to overcome language and technology barriers. Adjustments in communication methods and a continuous focus on cultural sensitivity have been significant in post-pandemic adaptation efforts. These efforts underscore the importance of Standard 2: Communicate Effectively and Standard 1: Welcome All Families, ensuring families feel included and heard. Additionally, the emphasis on sharing decision-making power speaks to Standard 5: Share Power.

This strategic synthesis directly addresses the research questions, illustrating how adaptations in family engagement practices, viewed through the lens of the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework and the national PTA Standards, are pivotal in navigating and overcoming contemporary educational challenges in rural schools.

Chapter 5 - Conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter is a summary of the study and recommendations for family engagement practices in a rural middle school setting. The chapter will provide a synopsis of major findings related to the literature, similarities and differences among stakeholder groups with the study's frameworks, and recommendations for future research. It will conclude with implications for how teachers, school and district leaders, and parents can create more effective family engagement practices, with a particular emphasis on rural settings.

Summary of the Study

The unprecedented school closures in 2020 prompted a rapid shift to remote learning, exacerbating existing disparities, particularly in rural areas where broadband access and other educational resources were already limited (Lai & Widmar, 2021). This set the stage for communities to better understand how family engagement has adapted to post-pandemic challenges and its subsequent impact on students' academic performance and well-being. Grounded in the National PTA Standards for Family-School Partnerships (National Parent Teacher Association, 2000), the research explored collaborative efforts between teachers, leaders, and parents. This study highlights the importance of meaningful communication and shared responsibility between schools and families to learn from the educational disruptions caused by the pandemic. Employing the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.), the study identified diverse community assets that contribute to a supportive educational environment, offering a broader perspective on how to strengthen family-school partnerships, especially in resource-limited rural settings (Sheldon & Epstein, 2003). The central research question investigated how leaders, teachers, and parents define effective family engagement practices at the middle school level in a rural setting within these frameworks. This inquiry is

anchored in the conceptual integration of the national PTA standards and the theoretical Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.), aiming to guide future engagement strategies in rural schools. Data for the study was collected from a combination of individual interviews and focus groups including classroom teachers, administrators, and middle school parents. The next section will provide a connection of the major findings to the literature.

Synopsis of Major Findings Related to the Literature

The pandemic has reshaped the way schools and families engage with one another. During the shift to remote learning, schools became more reliant on families to support student learning at home, and many parents gained a deeper understanding of the educational process. Teachers, leaders, and parents in this study began to deepen their understanding of families as essential partners in ensuring student success, creating stronger, and more reciprocal relationships between schools and families. The forced shift to virtual environments demonstrated the importance of involving families in education in new and meaningful ways, a practice that schools continue to work to sustain as they move forward in the post-pandemic world (Learning Heroes, 2020; National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement, 2020). The data from study participants, leaders, teachers, and parents, also revealed the importance of flexible communication strategies, incorporating both digital and in-person methods to ensure that all families remain engaged, regardless of their technological or linguistic backgrounds.

The literature underscored financial constraints, transportation issues, and cultural or linguistic differences continue to act as barriers to family engagement, particularly in rural settings (Epstein et al., 2011). Parents in this study often faced unique challenges, such as geographic isolation and limited access to resources like broadband internet and educational

materials. These barriers necessitate tailored strategies, including community partnerships and multilingual resources, to ensure that all families can participate meaningfully in their student's education (Epstein et al., 2011).

In response to these challenges, teachers and administrators have begun implementing more inclusive communication methods, combining digital tools with traditional, more personalized forms of communication. The pandemic also accelerated the use of technology platforms such as MyEducation Data (Trenholm & White, 2016) with schools recognizing the need to provide technology support and alternative engagement methods for families who struggle with digital access. In this study, teachers and administrators stressed the importance of cultural sensitivity in all communication, recognizing the diverse backgrounds of the families they serve.

The shift from "parent involvement" to "family engagement" represents a critical transformation in educational practices (Smolkowski et al., 2017). This approach goes beyond passive participation in school events; it requires an active and ongoing partnership between schools and families. Moreover, administrators in this study were encouraged to create partnerships where parents are given leadership roles and participate in decision-making processes. This necessary shift was especially evident during the pandemic, where the boundaries between home and school blurred, and families played a more active role in the daily learning routines of students. However, despite the well-documented benefits of family engagement, many parents in this study, particularly those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, faced significant barriers to involvement. Financial constraints, lack of transportation, and cultural or linguistic differences are just a few of the challenges that can limit family participation in school activities (Smolkowski et al., 2017). Addressing these barriers is

essential for creating an inclusive environment where all families can contribute to their student's educational experiences (Yoder & Lopez, 2013; Williams & Sanchez, 2013).

In rural settings, the challenges of family engagement are often exacerbated by geographic isolation and limited access to resources such as transportation and technology, creating additional difficulties for families trying to engage with schools and participate in their student's education (Hong et al., 2021). Nevertheless, both teachers and parents in this study often emphasized the importance of strong family school partnerships. Close knit communities in rural areas offer unique opportunities for collaboration, but schools must work harder to overcome logistical challenges and foster meaningful involvement. As schools move forward, the lessons learned will continue to shape family engagement practices. Digital tools will likely remain a key component of family school communication, but school administrators participating in this study noted the digital divide affecting many rural and low-income families must be addressed. Moving forward, successful family engagement requires a combination of technology, in-person support, and community partnerships to create an inclusive environment where all families can participate fully in the education of their student (Coady, 2019; Lucas, 2011).

In summary, the importance of adapting family engagement practices to the diverse needs of families, particularly in rural areas is very important. The discussions and perspectives shared from this study's stakeholder groups emphasized the role of technology, inclusive communication, and community support in ensuring that all families, regardless of socioeconomic or linguistic barriers, as essential to active parental engagement.

Similarities & Differences Among Stakeholder Groups with the Study's Frameworks

All stakeholder groups shared a commitment to the importance of family engagement for student success, aligning with standard three. Teachers, administrators, and parents in this study agreed that parental involvement positively impacts student academic outcomes and supports the diverse needs of students. This commitment reflects the concept of human capital in the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.), as it focuses on the development of skills, knowledge, and collaboration to enhance educational outcomes. Teacher Birch noted, “school-family collaboration positively impacts student academic success and well-being, particularly through student-led conferences held twice a year.” This shared understanding highlighted that family engagement is crucial for fostering human capital, which benefits both students and the broader school community.

The effectiveness and challenges of communication was another common theme across groups, closely tied to standard two (Heinrichs, 2024). Teachers, administrators, and parents in this study acknowledged difficulties in achieving effective communication between schools and families, especially in overcoming language barriers, technology access, and managing the sheer volume of information. This challenge is directly related to physical capital in the theoretical framework, as schools must improve their infrastructure and resources (e.g., communication platforms) to engage families more effectively. Tools like MyEducation Data (Trenholm & White, 2016), which houses all student information, could be leveraged to provide more accessible and real-time updates for families. As Teacher Maple explained, “it’s essential that we provide information in a way that families can fully understand.” School administrators must invest in accessible technology and language services to strengthen communication, which in turn supports family engagement and the sharing of vital information.

Cultural sensitivity and inclusivity emerged as priorities for all stakeholders in this study, aligning with standard one and cultural capital from the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.). Recognizing and respecting diverse cultural norms and traditions is essential for creating an inclusive school environment. In this study, teachers, administrators, and parents conveyed that supporting non-English-speaking families, particularly Hispanic families, enhances the cultural wealth of the community. Superintendent Pine highlighted, “we’ve been very conscientious at trying to make translation services happen though we can’t get every language available for everything needed.” By promoting cultural sensitivity, schools contribute to stronger community ties and build cultural capital, ensuring that all families feel welcome and engaged.

Despite these similarities, significant differences in perspectives and expectations also surfaced among the stakeholders in this research study. For instance, while administrators and teachers often perceived family engagement as a formalized collaboration through structured school-led initiatives, parents tended to view engagement more flexibly, aligning with standard four. This difference is tied to social capital from the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.), as it involves building partnerships for mutual support and resource sharing. Parents in this study expect schools to respect their time constraints and offer engagement opportunities that are easy to access and not overly time-consuming. As Parent Meadow reflected, “engagement should not be burdensome or time-consuming,” suggesting that schools should provide all methods for communication and plan activities, while understanding that participation may vary based on individual family circumstances. In this study, administrators focused on increasing parental participation through organized events and decision-making

committees, but to build social capital, schools must offer more flexible and accessible options that cater to diverse family needs.

The use of technology in communication is another point of divergence, especially in relation to standard two. Teachers and administrators participating in this study generally viewed digital platforms as essential tools for sharing information and staying connected with families. However, many parents' expressed challenges with technology, noting that not all families were comfortable using digital platforms or had consistent access to them. MyEducation Data (Trenholm & White, 2016), as a central platform for student information, can help streamline this process by offering multiple ways of accessing key student data, whether through mobile-friendly interfaces, text updates, or email notifications. This highlighted a gap in physical capital, as technological infrastructures may not yet accommodate all families' needs. Parent Ocean stated, "Texting is the easiest method for communication, as I'm unlikely to use email for such messages." Parent participants genuinely felt that email is not as convenient. In addition, parents, particularly those with limited technological skills, often preferred more traditional communication methods such as text messaging or phone calls, which they found easier to navigate and more personal.

Another difference among teachers, administrators, and parents in this case study encompassed how decision-making power was perceived, touching on standard five and connecting to political capital in the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.). Administrators are focused on empowering parents by involving them in decision-making processes through parent advisory committees and other formal structures. However, many parent participants felt that they were not fully integrated into these processes or that their voices were not always heard. As Teacher Birch shared, "Although we facilitate forums like parent

advisory committees to involve parents in the decision-making process, it often seems that the real impact of their contributions is minimal.” Political capital is built when schools actively engage diverse voices in decision-making, ensuring that families have a meaningful influence in shaping policies and initiatives. MyEducation Data (Trenholm & White, 2016) could serve as a tool not only for housing student information, but also for promoting transparency in decision-making processes. By allowing parents to access and monitor their child’s academic progress and school-related updates in real time, platforms like MyEducation Data (Trenholm & White, 2016) could empower families with the information they need to actively participate in advisory committees and school decisions.

Implications for Practice

Moving forward, several key implications for practice arise from these findings, aligned with the six national PTA standards and the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.).

Enhance Communication Channels: Schools must enhance communication channels by balancing digital and in-person communication methods to accommodate the varying needs of families. Providing multilingual options and simplifying digital tools can ensure broader access and engagement, particularly for families with limited technology skills or language barriers. A benefit of this would be an increase in physical capital, as investments in technology and translation services strengthen the infrastructure for effective family engagement and in the broader community. Schools should also maintain more traditional communication methods like phone calls, face-to-face meetings, or even handwritten messages to support those who prefer or require them.

Flexibility in Family Engagement Strategies: Flexibility in family engagement strategies is another important area for improvement. Schools should offer a range of low-pressure, accessible opportunities for families to engage with the school. Simplified events like family game nights, personalized invitations, and flexible scheduling encourage broader participation without overwhelming families. These strategies foster social capital by building strong networks of trust and cooperation between schools and families that carry into the community at-large. Recognizing that not all parents can commit to formalized involvement, schools should allow for diverse levels of engagement based on parents' availability and interests.

Prioritize Cultural Sensitivity and Inclusivity: Schools must continue to prioritize cultural sensitivity and inclusivity in their engagement strategies. Addressing cultural differences through proactive outreach, tailored resources, and expanded translation services help ensure that all families, especially non-English-speaking and minority families, feel welcomed and supported. By fostering a culturally inclusive environment, schools build cultural capital that strengthens ties within the community and creates equitable opportunities for engagement.

Implications for practice as identified in this study, address these differences and build on shared goals which help schools create more effective family engagement strategies aligning with the national PTA standards and the goals of the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.). By enhancing communication, offering flexible engagement opportunities, and prioritizing inclusivity, schools can create stronger partnerships with families, build various forms of capital, and ultimately improve student outcomes.

Recommendations for Further Research

Exploring Technological Barriers in Rural Family Engagement: One key area for future research is the ongoing technological challenges that hinder effective family engagement in rural schools. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored disparities in broadband access, which exacerbated educational inequities in rural communities (Lai & Widmar, 2021). However, there is a need to explore how these barriers continue to impact family-school partnerships as the world becomes increasingly technologically dependent. Further studies should examine the long-term effects of limited technological access and assess whether recent advancements or policy interventions have successfully bridged the digital divide. Research could also investigate the effectiveness of state and federal programs aimed at improving internet connectivity in rural areas and their impact on facilitating family engagement.

Comparative Studies Between Rural and Urban Family Engagement: Another valuable area of inquiry involves comparing family engagement practices between rural and urban schools. While both settings faced challenges during the pandemic, the nature of these challenges varied significantly, with rural schools struggling more with technological infrastructure and urban schools encountering different resource limitations (Proctor et al., 2023). A comparative analysis could highlight the distinct needs and advantages of each environment, allowing researchers and policymakers to tailor engagement strategies and funding resources to specific community contexts. Understanding these differences could guide the creation of more inclusive and effective family engagement frameworks that address the diverse challenges faced by rural and urban schools.

The Role of Cultural and Socioeconomic Factors in Family Engagement: Further research should explore the influence of cultural and socioeconomic factors on family

engagement practices in rural schools. This study demonstrates that family engagement is critical for addressing educational disruptions in rural settings, but it does not fully address how cultural values, or economic conditions shape these practices. Future research could investigate how schools can implement culturally responsive engagement strategies that are sensitive to the needs and values of diverse rural populations. Additionally, examining the economic constraints that limit family participation in school activities would offer insights into how schools can better support families from disadvantaged backgrounds in maintaining active roles in their student's education.

Policy Impacts on Family Engagement in Rural Schools: There is a need for further research on the impact of local, state, and federal education policies on family engagement in rural schools. Although the national PTA standards offer a framework for family-school partnerships, their implementation can vary widely depending on policy decisions (National Parent Teacher Association, 2000). Future studies should evaluate how recent policies, particularly moving forward from the challenges of pandemic recovery, have influenced family engagement efforts in rural settings. Research could also assess the effectiveness of relief funds and other resources in supporting schools to overcome barriers to engagement and improve student outcomes. Such studies would be crucial in guiding future policy decisions to enhance family-school collaboration in these communities.

Examining Layers of Rurality in Family Engagement Practices: Finally, an additional area for future research is the exploration of different degrees of rural isolation to understand how these variations influence family engagement in schools. Rural communities are diverse, ranging from remote, sparsely populated areas to more connected small towns, each with unique social, economic, and infrastructural characteristics. Investigating how these distinctions affect

family engagement could reveal specific challenges and strengths within rural settings, such as differences in community networks, available resources, and cultural expectations around school involvement. Studies should explore whether unique engagement strategies are needed for highly isolated, moderately remote, and semi-rural schools, as each context may have specific strengths and limitations. This approach could inform targeted, region-specific family engagement initiatives, enabling policymakers and educators to better support diverse rural communities in fostering active and resilient school-family partnerships. These research recommendations aim to address gaps in understanding the complex factors that shape family engagement in rural schools and provide a foundation for future improvements in practice and policy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provided valuable insights into the perceptions of teachers, administrators, and parents regarding family engagement in a rural, middle school setting in a midwestern state. By examining these stakeholder groups' experiences, the study highlighted both shared goals and differing challenges, offering a comprehensive understanding of how family engagement can be strengthened. The alignment of these perceptions with the national PTA standards and the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework (RUPRI, n.d.) demonstrated the multifaceted nature of family-school partnerships. These frameworks provide a solid foundation for addressing communication gaps, fostering inclusivity, and building stronger community ties that benefit student outcomes.

Key findings from the study recognize that effective family engagement requires a balance between digital and traditional communication methods, culturally sensitive practices, and flexible engagement opportunities. While teachers and administrators view technology as essential, many parents face barriers in accessing or navigating digital platforms. The use of tools

like the MyEducation Data platform (Trenholm & White, 2016) can help bridge this gap by providing accessible, streamlined communication channels between schools and families, offering parents a user-friendly way to stay informed and engaged. However, this also calls for schools to invest in both physical and human capital to enhance technological infrastructure and access, ensuring that families have the skills and knowledge needed to engage meaningfully with schools. In addition, schools must foster networks of trust and inclusivity through tailored, culturally sensitive engagement strategies that meet the diverse needs of families.

Finally, there is a need for schools to share power with families more equitably by involving parents in decision-making processes and addressing underrepresented voices. By doing so, schools can ensure family engagement strategies are not only inclusive, but also representative of diverse perspectives. Encouraging family participation in governance structures like parent advisory committees will help families feel more empowered and invested in their student's education, leading to stronger partnerships between schools and communities.

Moving forward, future family engagement practices should continue to evolve in response to the unique needs of rural communities and responding to the distinctive needs of the middle level student. The complexities of the layers of rurality could provide important indicators to guide community response. In addition, by focusing on collaborative strategies that leverage all forms of capital (i.e., social, cultural, human, physical, and political), schools can create sustainable, equitable environments that promote both student academic success and community resilience. These findings provide a roadmap for strengthening family school partnerships in rural schools with the national PTA standards offering a strong pathway to ensuring that all stakeholders are actively engaged in supporting student growth and development at the middle level.

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Appendix A - Letter of Invitation and Consent for Leaders

Letter of Invitation to Participate in a Research Study

December 2023

Title of Study: “Examining family engagement practices post-pandemic: A rural middle school case study.”

Principal Investigators: Donna Augustine-Shaw, Ed. D., Associate Professor, College of Education Department of Education Leadership

Student Principal Investigator: Kimberly Mauk, Doctoral Student, College of Education, Kansas State University

To Administrators:

I, Kimberly Mauk, from the Department of the College of Education, Kansas State University, invite you to participate in a research project entitled, “Examining family engagement practices post-pandemic: A rural middle school case study.”

The purpose of this study is to describe impactful family engagement practices and partnerships at the middle school level in a rural school district. This qualitative case study investigation will help to understand how best to utilize resources, data, and conversations as effective family school partnerships.

The expected duration: one 45-60-minute face-to-face interview with each administrator, one 60-minute focus group with superintendent and principal.

The location of these interviews will be in the natural setting: district office conference room. The times and dates of the interviews will be determined by the administrators.

This research should benefit the district leadership to possibly restructure, improve, or adjust family engagement practices.

If you have any pertinent questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Kansas State University of Research Compliance Office at 203 Fairchild Hall Manhattan KS, 66502; at 785-532-3224; 785-532-3278 fax; or comply@k-state.edu.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me (see below for contact information).

Thank you,

Kimberly Mauk

Doctoral Student, College of Education, Kansas State University
316-371-4878, kdmauk@ksu.edu

Consent for Leaders

PROJECT TITLE:

Examining family engagement practices post-pandemic: A rural middle school case study

**PROJECT
APPROVAL DATE:****PROJECT
EXPIRATION
DATE:****LENGTH
OF STUDY:**

1 year

**PRINCIPAL
INVESTIGATOR:**

Dr. Donna Augustine-Shaw

CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):

Kimberly Mauk

**CONTACT DETAILS FOR
PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:**

Kimberly Mauk – 316-371-4878
Dr. Donna Augustine-Shaw – 785-532-2597

**IRB CHAIR CONTACT
INFORMATION:**

Lisa Rubin, (785) 532-3224

**PROJECT
SPONSOR:**

Kimberly Mauk

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore the perceptions of school and district leaders, teachers, and parents regarding family engagement in a mid-western rural school district at the middle-school level. This study will explore the connection between the National Parent Teacher Association standards for family-school partnership and what we have learned about family engagement post-pandemic.

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:

This study will apply a qualitative study of school and district leaders, teachers, and parents regarding family engagement in a mid-western rural school district at the middle-school level.

The participants will include two administrators, four teachers, and four-six parents. Administrators will be interviewed individually and then will participate in a focus group. Teachers will be interviewed individually and then will participate in a focus group. Parents will be interviewed individually and then will participate in a focus group.

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED:

There is minimal anticipated physical or psychological risk for the student participants. Each participant is encouraged to share honestly and openly.

BENEFITS ANTICIPATED:

This study will serve as social reality for current family engagement practices. It will provide a real-life experience for stakeholders to engage in conversation around family engagement practices. Finally, it will provide feedback and support to future challenges in

education and how a focus on family engagement can lead to more effective strategies, improved outcomes, and a more meaningful and collaborative relationship between families and schools.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:

While confidentiality will be observed and participants will be given pseudonyms, I cannot guarantee anonymity during the focus group.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

PARTICIPANT NAME:

**PARTICIPANT
SIGNATURE:**

DATE:

Appendix B - Letter of Invitation and Consent Form for Teachers

Letter of Invitation to Participate in a Research Study

December 2023

Title of Study: “Examining family engagement practices post-pandemic: A rural middle school case study.”

Principal Investigators: Donna Augustine-Shaw, Ed. D., Associate Professor, College of Education Department of Education Leadership

Student Principal Investigator: Kimberly Mauk, Doctoral Student, College of Education, Kansas State University

To Teachers:

I, Kimberly Mauk, from the Department of the College of Education, Kansas State University, invite you to participate in a research project entitled, “Examining family engagement practices post-pandemic: A rural middle school case study.”

The purpose of this study is to describe impactful family engagement practices and partnerships at the middle school level in a rural school district. This qualitative case study investigation will help to understand how best to utilize resources, data, and conversations as effective family school partnerships.

The expected duration: one 45-60-minute face-to-face interview with each teacher; one 60-minute focus group with teachers.

The location of these interviews will be in the natural setting: middle school conference room. The times and dates of the interviews will be determined by the principal.

This research should benefit the school to possibly restructure, improve, or adjust family engagement practices.

If you have any pertinent questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Kansas State University of Research Compliance Office at 203 Fairchild Hall Manhattan KS, 66502; at 785-532-3224; 785-532-3278 fax; or comply@k-state.edu.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me (see below for contact information).

Thank you,

Kimberly Mauk

Doctoral Student, College of Education, Kansas State University
316-371-4878, kdmauk@ksu.edu

Consent for Teachers

PROJECT TITLE:

Examining family engagement practices post-pandemic: A rural middle school case study

**PROJECT
APPROVAL DATE:****PROJECT
EXPIRATION
DATE:****LENGTH
OF STUDY:**

1 year

**PRINCIPAL
INVESTIGATOR:**

Dr. Donna Augustine-Shaw

CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):

Kimberly Mauk

**CONTACT DETAILS FOR
PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:**

Kimberly Mauk – 316-371-4878
Dr. Donna Augustine-Shaw - 785-532-2597

**IRB CHAIR CONTACT
INFORMATION:**

Lisa Rubin, (785) 532-3224

PROJECT SPONSOR:

Kimberly Mauk

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore the perceptions of school and district leaders, teachers, and parents regarding family engagement in a mid-western rural school district at the middle-school level. This study will explore the connection between the National Parent Teacher Association standards for family-school partnership and what we have learned about family engagement post-pandemic.

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:

This study will apply a qualitative study of school and district leaders, teachers, and parents regarding family engagement in a mid-western rural school district at the middle-school level.

The participants will include two administrators, four teachers, and four-six parents. Administrators will be interviewed individually and then will participate in a focus group. Teachers will be interviewed individually and then will participate in a focus group. Parents will be interviewed individually and then will participate in a focus group.

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED:

There is minimal anticipated physical or psychological risk for the student participants. Each participant is encouraged to share honestly and openly.

BENEFITS ANTICIPATED:

This study will serve as social reality for current family engagement practices. It will provide a real-life experience for stakeholders to engage in conversation around family

engagement practices. Finally, it will provide feedback and support to future challenges in education and how a focus on family engagement can lead to more effective strategies, improved outcomes, and a more meaningful and collaborative relationship between families and schools.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:

While confidentiality will be observed and participants will be given pseudonyms, I cannot guarantee anonymity during the focus group.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

PARTICIPANT NAME:

**PARTICIPANT
SIGNATURE:**

DATE:

Appendix C - Letter of Invitation and Consent Form for Parents

Letter of Invitation to Participate in a Research Study

December 2023

Title of Study: “Examining family engagement practices post-pandemic: A rural middle school case study.”

Principal Investigators: Donna Augustine-Shaw, Ed. D., Associate Professor, College of Education Department of Education Leadership

Student Principal Investigator: Kimberly Mauk, Doctoral Student, College of Education, Kansas State University

To Parents:

I, Kimberly Mauk, from the Department of the College of Education, Kansas State University, invite you to participate in a research project entitled, “Examining family engagement practices post-pandemic: A rural middle school case study.”

The purpose of this study is to describe impactful family engagement practices and partnerships at the middle school level in a rural school district. This qualitative case study investigation will help to understand how best to utilize resources, data, and conversations as effective family school partnerships.

The expected duration: one 45-60-minute face-to-face interview with each parent; one 60-minute focus group with parents.

The location of these interviews will be in the natural setting: middle school conference room. The times and dates of the interviews will be determined by the principal.

This research should benefit the district leadership to possibly restructure, improve, or adjust family engagement practices.

If you have any pertinent questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Kansas State University of Research Compliance Office at 203 Fairchild Hall Manhattan KS, 66502; at 785-532-3224; 785-532-3278 fax; or comply@k-state.edu.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me (see below for contact information).

Thank you,

Kimberly Mauk

Doctoral Student, College of Education, Kansas State University
316-371-4878, kdmauk@ksu.edu

Consent for Parents

PROJECT TITLE:

Examining family engagement practices post-pandemic: A rural middle school case study

**PROJECT
APPROVAL DATE:****PROJECT
EXPIRATION
DATE:****LENGTH
OF STUDY:**

1 year

**PRINCIPAL
INVESTIGATOR:**

Dr. Donna Augustine-Shaw

CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):

Kimberly Mauk

**CONTACT DETAILS FOR
PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:**

Kimberly Mauk – 316-371-4878
Dr. Donna Augustine-Shaw – 785-532-2597

**IRB CHAIR CONTACT
INFORMATION:**

Lisa Rubin, (785) 532-3224

PROJECT SPONSOR:

Kimberly Mauk

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore the perceptions of school and district leaders, teachers, and parents regarding family engagement in a mid-western rural school district at the middle-school level. This study will explore the connection between the National Parent Teacher Association standards for family-school partnership and what we have learned about family engagement post-pandemic.

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:

This study will apply a qualitative study of school and district leaders, teachers, and parents regarding family engagement in a mid-western rural school district at the middle-school level.

The participants will include two administrators, four teachers, and four-six parents. Administrators will be interviewed individually and then will participate in a focus group. Teachers will be interviewed individually and then will participate in a focus group. Parents will be interviewed individually and then will participate in a focus group.

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED:

There is minimal anticipated physical or psychological risk for the student participants. Each participant is encouraged to share honestly and openly.

BENEFITS ANTICIPATED:

This study will serve as social reality for current family engagement practices. It will provide a real-life experience for stakeholders to engage in conversation around family

engagement practices. Finally, it will provide feedback and support to future challenges in education and how a focus on family engagement can lead to more effective strategies, improved outcomes, and a more meaningful and collaborative relationship between families and schools.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:

While confidentiality will be observed and participants will be given pseudonyms, I cannot guarantee anonymity during the focus group.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

PARTICIPANT NAME:

**PARTICIPANT
SIGNATURE:**

DATE:

Appendix D - Leader Interview Protocol

Introduction to be shared with the interviewee:

“Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. As I ask the questions, we will be talking about family engagement in your middle school and in your rural school setting. We will focus on the post pandemic time period (fall 2021). Stakeholders will include teachers, parents, students, and the community. I am interested in learning about your perceptions about family engagement practices at the middle school level. Specifically, to understand current practices in this setting and their impact on the future. Our time is meant to feel like a conversation. Please remember that I will keep what you share with me confidential, though I cannot promise anonymity. I encourage you to share your perceptions openly and honestly. There are no consequences or penalties for what you choose to share. I will record our session.”

Participants will be asked the following questions:

1. How has your school approached the task of welcoming and involving families’ post-pandemic?
Probe: Can you tell me about strategies or initiatives implemented by the school to ensure that all families feel welcomed and included?
2. How have communication methods or platforms been effective in engaging families since the pandemic?
Probe: Do you have examples of challenges or successes in the way you have communicated and connected with families?
3. How does your middle school demonstrate understanding and respect for the diverse cultural family backgrounds in your school?
Probe: Could you share instances where the school embraced cultural sensitivity to create a more welcoming environment for families?
4. How does school-family collaboration impact student academic success and well-being in your school?
Probe: Have there been specific administrative efforts aimed at encouraging increased family involvement in student learning and well-being?
5. How has your school differentiated or adapted its approach to engaging families with varying needs and circumstances?
Probe: Can you share an example where adjustments were made to better accommodate the needs of families?
6. How do community partnerships support your school's efforts to welcome families?
Probe: Can you discuss successful collaborations or initiatives with parents and community organizations/resources that provided an opportunity for shared decision-making?
7. How did you support families after the pandemic, particularly in your rural school setting?
Probe: How did you collaborate with staff, parents, and the community to navigate the post-pandemic transition?
8. How have you responded to what you learned about family engagement during the pandemic?
Probe: Can you provide an example of how family engagement has changed?

Probe: Have you implemented any new approaches or tools in your school to engage families?

Debriefing Statement:

“Thank you for your time today. I’d like to remind you that you may withdraw from the study at any given time. Data will be stored in a password protected computer and destroyed three years after the completion of the study. I will allow you to view the transcript to check for accuracy and proper representation. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns, please don’t hesitate to contact me through email, kdmauk@ksu.edu, or by phone.”

Appendix E - Teacher Interview Protocol

Introduction to be shared with the interviewee:

“Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. As I ask the questions, we will be talking about family engagement in your middle school and in your rural school setting. We will focus on the post pandemic time period (fall 2021). Stakeholders will include teachers, parents, students, and the community. I am interested in learning about your perceptions about family engagement practices at the middle school level. Specifically, to understand current practices in this setting and their impact for the future. Our time is meant to feel like a conversation. Please remember that I will keep what you share with me confidential, though I cannot promise anonymity. I encourage you to share your perceptions openly and honestly. There are no consequences or penalties for what you choose to share. I will record our session.”

Participants will be asked the following questions:

1. How has your school approached the task of welcoming and involving families’ post-pandemic?
Probe: Can you tell me about strategies or initiatives implemented by the school to ensure that all families feel welcomed and included?
2. How have communication methods or platforms been effective in engaging families since the pandemic?
Probe: Do you have examples of challenges or successes in the way you have communicated and connected with families?
3. How does your middle school demonstrate understanding and respect for the diverse cultural family backgrounds in your school?
Probe: Could you share instances where the school embraced cultural sensitivity to create a more welcoming environment for families?
4. How does school-family collaboration impact student academic success and well-being in your school?
Probe: Have there been specific teacher efforts aimed at encouraging increased family involvement in student learning and well-being?
5. How has your school differentiated or adapted its approach to engaging families with varying needs and circumstances?
Probe: Can you share an example where adjustments were made to better accommodate the needs of families?
6. How do community partnerships support your school's efforts to welcome families?
Probe: Can you discuss successful collaborations or initiatives with parents and community organizations/resources that provided an opportunity for shared decision-making?
7. How did you support families after the pandemic, particularly in your rural school setting?
Probe: How did you collaborate with staff, parents, and the community to navigate the post-pandemic transition?
8. How have you responded to what you learned about family engagement during the pandemic?
Probe: Can you provide an example of how family engagement has changed?

Probe: Have you implemented any new approaches or tools in your school to engage families?

Debriefing Statement:

“Thank you for your time today. I’d like to remind you that you may withdraw from the study at any given time. Data will be stored in a password protected computer and destroyed three years after the completion of the study. I will allow you to view the transcript to check for accuracy and proper representation. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns, please don’t hesitate to contact me through email, kdmauk@ksu.edu, or by phone.

Appendix F - Parent Interview Protocol

Introduction to be shared with the interviewee:

“Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. As I ask the questions, we will be talking about family engagement in your middle school and in your rural school setting. We will focus on the post pandemic time period (fall 2021). Stakeholders will include teachers, parents, students, and the community. I am interested in learning about your perceptions about family engagement practices at the middle school level. Specifically, to understand current practices in this setting and their impact for the future. Our time is meant to feel like a conversation. Please remember that I will keep what you share with me confidential, though I cannot promise anonymity. I encourage you to share your perceptions openly and honestly. There are no consequences or penalties for what you choose to share. I will record our session.”

Participants will be asked the following questions:

1. How has the school approached the task of welcoming and involving families post-pandemic?
Probe: Can you tell me the ways that your school has made you feel welcomed and included?
2. How has communication from the school changed since the pandemic?
Probe: Do you have examples of challenges or successes in the way the school has communicated and connected with you?
3. How does your middle school demonstrate understanding and respect for the diverse cultural family backgrounds?
Probe: Could you share instances where the school embraced cultural sensitivity to create a more welcoming environment for you?
4. How do you believe the collaboration between school and families influences the academic success and well-being of students at your student's school?
Probe: Have you noticed any particular efforts made by the administrator or teachers to encourage greater family involvement in your child's learning and well-being?
5. How has the school adjusted its methods to involve your family with your students' different needs and circumstances?
Probe: Can you share an example where adjustments were made to better accommodate the needs of your family?
6. How does the community contribute to your school's efforts in welcoming you?
Probe: Can you share any successful collaborations or initiatives involving parents and community organizations/resources that allowed you to participate in the decisions?
9. How did the school support your family after the pandemic, particularly in your rural school setting?
Probe: Could you share an example of how the school staff helped you and your student during the transition following the pandemic?
7. How has the school's approach to family engagement changed following the pandemic?
Probe: Can you provide an example of how family engagement has changed at the school based on your observations or experiences?

Probe: Has the school implemented any new approaches or tools to engage families?

Debriefing Statement:

“Thank you for your time today. I’d like to remind you that you may withdraw from the study at any given time. Data will be stored in a password protected computer and destroyed three years after the completion of the study. I will allow you to view the transcript to check for accuracy and proper representation. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns, please don’t hesitate to contact me through email, kdmauk@ksu.edu, or by phone.”

Appendix G - Leader Focus Group Protocol

Introduction statement for the focus group:

“Thank you for joining us today. Our goal is to share our stories and experiences about the family engagement practices at the middle school level in your rural school setting, specifically, to understand current practices and the impact for the future. We will focus on the post pandemic period (fall 2021). Stakeholders will include teachers, parents, students, and the community. Please feel free to expand on each other’s thoughts. I will record our session.”

The focus group will answer the following in a group dialogue setting.

Observations of interactions will be added to research notes.

1. Tell me about the approaches that have proven successful in fostering family engagement in your school.
Probe: How does your school welcome all families?
2. Describe the key elements of effective communication with families in a school environment.
Probe: How do you envision implementing communication strategies that promote transparency, engagement, and understanding with families?
Probe: Can you share any specific instances where effective communication had a significant impact on enhancing the school's relationships with families?
3. Tell me about approaches or initiatives you have implemented to ensure equitable access to resources, educational services, and opportunities for all students to succeed academically and socially.
Probe: How do you envision collaborating with parents and the community to create a support system that addresses diverse student needs and fosters an environment where every student can achieve their full potential?
4. How do you actively encourage and embrace the diverse voices and perspectives of students and families?
Probe: Describe measures or practices you have implemented to create an inclusive space where students and families feel not only heard, but also valued, respected, and empowered.
5. Describe practices or structures you have implemented to create a more participatory environment where parents and families feel empowered to contribute to decision-making processes within the school?
Probe: How do you envision fostering a collaborative culture that shares power with families and diverse perspectives?
Probe: How do you ensure diverse perspectives play a pivotal role in shaping the school's policies and directions?
6. Can you tell me about how you collaborate with parents and families?
Probe: How do you envision fostering a culture where collaboration is important in shaping school policies and initiatives?
7. Share your ideas about looking to the future with family engagement.
Probe: What have you learned, what changes might be important, and do you have any initiatives you are excited about?

Debriefing Statement:

“Thank you for your time today. I’d like to remind you that you may withdraw from the study at any given time. Data will be stored in a password protected computer and destroyed three years after the completion of the study. I will allow you to view the transcript to check for accuracy and proper representation. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns, please don’t hesitate to contact me through email, kdmauk@ksu.edu, or by phone.

Appendix H - Teacher Focus Group Protocol

Introduction statement for the focus group:

“Thank you for joining us today. Our goal is to share our stories and experiences about the family engagement practices at the middle school level in your rural school setting, specifically, to understand current practices and the impact for the future. We will focus on the post pandemic period (fall 2021). Stakeholders will include teachers, parents, students, and the community. Please feel free to expand on each other’s thoughts. I will record our session.”

The focus group will answer the following in a group dialogue setting.

Observations of interactions will be added to research notes.

1. Tell me about the approaches that have proven successful in fostering family engagement in your school.
Probe: How does your school welcome all families?
2. Describe the key elements of effective communication with families in a school environment.
Probe: How do you envision implementing communication strategies that promote transparency, engagement, and understanding with families?
Probe: Can you share any specific instances where effective communication had a significant impact on enhancing the school's relationships with families?
3. Tell me about approaches or initiatives the school has implemented to ensure equitable access to resources, educational services, and opportunities for your student to succeed academically and socially.
Probe: How do you envision collaborating with parents and the community to create a support system that addresses diverse student needs and fosters an environment where every student can achieve their full potential?
4. How do you actively encourage and embrace the diverse voices and perspectives of students and families?
Probe: Describe measures or practices you have implemented to create an inclusive space where students and families feel not only heard, but also valued, respected, and empowered.
5. Describe practices or structures you have implemented to create a more participatory environment where parents and families feel empowered to contribute to decision-making processes within the school.
Probe: How do you envision fostering a collaborative culture that shares power with families and diverse perspectives?
Probe: How do you ensure diverse perspectives play a pivotal role in shaping the school's policies and directions?
6. Can you tell me about how you collaborate with parents and families?
Probe: How do you envision fostering a culture where collaboration is important in shaping school policies and initiatives?
7. Share your ideas about looking to the future with family engagement.
Probe: What have you learned, what changes might be important, and do you have any initiatives you are excited about?

Debriefing Statement:

“Thank you for your time today. I’d like to remind you that you may withdraw from the study at any given time. Data will be stored in a password protected computer and destroyed three years after the completion of the study. I will allow you to view the transcript to check for accuracy and proper representation. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns, please don’t hesitate to contact me through email, kdmauk@ksu.edu, or by phone.

Appendix I - Parent Focus Group Protocol

Introduction statement for the focus group:

“Thank you for joining us today. Our goal is to share our stories and experiences about the family engagement practices at the middle school level in your rural school setting, specifically, to understand current practices and the impact for the future. We will focus on the post pandemic period (fall 2021). Stakeholders will include teachers, parents, students, and the community. Please feel free to expand on each other’s thoughts. I will record our session.”

The focus group will answer the following in a group dialogue setting.

Observations of interactions will be added to research notes.

1. Tell me about the approaches that the school has implemented that have proven successful in fostering family engagement at the middle school post-pandemic.
Probe: How does your school welcome all families?
2. What would you say are the key elements to ensure effective communication with families?
Probe: What communication strategies does the school use to ensure openness, involvement, and mutual understanding with families?
Probe: Can you share any specific instances where communication had a significant impact upon your family?
3. Tell me about approaches or initiatives that the school has implemented to ensure equitable access to resources, educational services, and opportunities for your student to succeed academically and socially.
Probe: How has the school collaborated with you to create a support system that addresses diverse student needs and fosters an environment where every student can achieve their full potential?
4. How does the school actively encourage and embrace the diverse voices and perspectives of students and families?
Probe: Describe practices the school has implemented to create an inclusive space where you and your student(s) feel not only heard, but also valued, respected, and empowered.
5. Describe practices or structures the school has implemented to create a more participatory environment where you and your student(s) feel empowered to contribute to decision-making processes within the school.
Probe: How does the school foster a collaborative culture that shares power with you and your student(s)?
Probe: How does the school ensure diverse perspectives play a pivotal role in shaping the school's policies and directions?
6. Can you tell me about how administrators and teachers collaborate with parents and families?
Probe: How does the school foster a culture where collaboration is important in shaping school policies and initiatives?
7. Share your ideas about looking to the future with family engagement.
Probe: What have you learned since the pandemic, what changes might be important, and do you have any recommendations for how this can be improved?

Debriefing Statement:

“Thank you for your time today. I’d like to remind you that you may withdraw from the study at any given time. Data will be stored in a password protected computer and destroyed three years after the completion of the study. I will allow you to view the transcript to check for accuracy and proper representation. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns, please don’t hesitate to contact me through email, kdmauk@ksu.edu, or by phone.

Appendix J – Teacher Interview Findings

Theme	Categories	Conceptual Framework (National PTA Standards)	Theoretical Framework (Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework)
Community Partnerships and Support	Support for Resources	Standard 6: Collaborate with Community	Social Capital: Building partnerships for mutual support and resource sharing
	Engagement in Activities	Standard 5: Share Power	
	Donation and Funding Cycles		
Family Engagement and Involvement	Engagement Through Activities	Standard 1: Welcome All Families	Human Capital: Strengthening skills, knowledge, and involvement in education
	Technology Barriers	Standard 2: Communicate Effectively	
	Post-Pandemic Changes	Standard 4: Speak Up for Every Child	
Communication Methods and Platforms	Shift to Digital Platforms	Standard 2: Communicate Effectively	Physical Capital: Improving infrastructure to enhance access to communication and engagement
	Platform Diversity Issues		
	In-Person Interactions		
Cultural Sensitivity and Inclusivity	Language Services	Standard 1: Welcome All Families	Cultural Capital: Respecting and incorporating diverse cultural norms and traditions
	Request for Cultural Norms	Standard 3: Support Student Success	
	Welcoming Environment		
Academic Success and Student Needs	Role of Family Collaboration	Standard 3: Support Student Success	Human Capital: Enhancing student outcomes through collaboration and tailored support
	Differentiation for Diverse Needs	Standard 4: Speak Up for Every Child	
	Teacher Efforts and Support		

Appendix K – Teacher Focus Group Findings

Theme	Categories	Conceptual Framework (National PTA Standards)	Theoretical Framework (Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework)
Parental Involvement	Varied by Educational Level	Standard 3: Support Student Success	Human Capital: Strengthening skills, knowledge, and involvement in education
Communication Challenges	Language Barriers	Standard 2: Communicate Effectively	Social Capital: Building partnerships for mutual support and resource sharing
Technology Utilization	Effective Use	Standard 6: Collaborate with Community	Physical Capital: Improving infrastructure to enhance access to communication and engagement
Resource Accessibility	Equitable Access	Standard 5: Share Power	Financial Capital: Allocating monetary resources for investment, growth, and economic stability.
Cultural Influence	Understanding Diverse Perspectives	Standard 1: Welcome All Families	Cultural Capital: Respecting and incorporating diverse cultural norms and traditions
Empowerment Initiatives	Encouraging Family Participation	Standard 4: Speak Up for Every Child	Political Capital: Leveraging influence and networks for strategic advantage and policy success.
Resource Accessibility	Community Resource Collaboration	Standard 6: Collaborate with Community	Social Capital: Building partnerships for mutual support and resource sharing Physical Capital: Improving infrastructure to enhance access to communication and engagement

Appendix L – Teacher Overall Findings

Theme	Categories	Conceptual Framework (National PTA Standards)	Theoretical Framework (Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework)
Community Partnerships and Support	Support for Resources	Standard 6: Collaborate with the Community	Financial Capital: Monetary resources for programs and activities.
	Engagement in Activities		Social Capital: Networks and relationships that facilitate collaboration and resource-sharing.
	Donation and Funding Cycles		
Family Engagement and Involvement	Engagement Through Activities	Standard 1: Welcome All Families	Social Capital: Connections among families and the school that strengthen engagement.
	Technology Barriers		Cultural Capital: Respecting diverse cultural backgrounds and practices within the school community.
	Post- Pandemic Changes		
Communication Methods and Platforms	Shift to Digital Platforms	Standard 2: Communicate Effectively	Physical Capital: Infrastructure, such as technology and facilities, which supports communication.
	Platform Diversity Issues		Intellectual Capital: Knowledge and skills for effective use of communication platforms.
	In-Person Interactions		
Cultural Sensitivity and Inclusivity	Language Services	Standard 3: Support Student Success	Cultural Capital: Inclusion of diverse cultural perspectives and values.
	Request for Cultural Norms	Standard 4: Speak Up for Every Child	Social Capital: Building strong relationships across cultural lines to promote understanding and inclusivity.
	Welcoming Environment		
Academic Success and Student Needs	Role of Family Collaboration	Standard 3: Support Student Success	Human Capital: Skills and expertise of teachers and staff in meeting diverse student needs.

Differentiation for Diverse Needs Teacher Efforts and Support	Social Capital: Family-school partnerships that support academic growth.
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Appendix M – Administrator Interview Findings

Theme	Categories	Conceptual Framework (National PTA Standards)	Theoretical Framework (Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework)
Technology and Equity	Language support through earbuds and translation	Standard 6: Collaborate with the Community	Human Capital: Strengthening skills, knowledge, and involvement in education
	Technology integration for accessibility	Standard 6: Collaborate with the Community	Financial Capital: Allocating monetary resources for investment, growth, and economic stability
Family Engagement Strategies	Combining events for appeal (e.g., shows, dances)	Standard 4: Speak Up for Every Child	Cultural Capital: Respecting and incorporating diverse cultural norms and traditions
	Incentives and themes (e.g., food, games)	Standard 3: Support Student Success	Social Capital: Building partnerships for mutual support and resource sharing
Cultural and Linguistic Sensitivity	Addressing language barriers and cultural differences	Standard 2: Communicate Effectively	Cultural Capital: Respecting and incorporating diverse cultural norms and traditions
	Hiring practices reflecting community diversity	Standard 6: Collaborate with the Community	Human Capital: Strengthening skills, knowledge, and involvement in education
Effective Communication	Utilizing diverse media (newsletters, social media)	Standard 2: Communicate Effectively	Cultural Capital: Respecting and incorporating diverse cultural norms and traditions
	Clear and transparent communication	Standard 2: Communicate Effectively	Social Capital: Building partnerships for mutual support and resource sharing
Feedback and Continuous Improvement	Utilizing feedback for actionable change	Standard 5: Share Power	Political Capital: Leveraging influence and networks for strategic advantage and policy success

	Survey strategies and response rate improvement	Standard 5: Share Power	Political Capital: Leveraging influence and networks for strategic advantage and policy success
Parent Involvement Challenges	Engaging underrepresented groups	Standard 4: Speak Up for Every Child	Social Capital: Building partnerships for mutual support and resource sharing
	Balancing schedules and responsibilities	Standard 3: Support Student Success	Physical Capital: Improving infrastructure to enhance access to communication and engagement
Student and Family-Centered Approaches	Focus on practical life skills	Standard 3: Support Student Success	Human Capital: Strengthening skills, knowledge, and involvement in education
	Student-led activities and empowerment	Standard 5: Share Power	Political Capital: Leveraging influence and networks for strategic advantage and policy success.
Building Trust and Relationships	Importance of small interactions and personal touch	Standard 1: Welcome All Families	Social Capital: Building partnerships for mutual support and resource sharing
	Building positive relations at conferences	Standard 1: Welcome All Families	Social Capital: Building partnerships for mutual support and resource sharing
Innovative Engagement Practices	Utilizing non-traditional engagement methods	Standard 3: Support Student Success	Cultural Capital: Respecting and incorporating diverse cultural norms and traditions
	Integrating educational content with fun activities	Standard 3: Support Student Success	Cultural Capital: Respecting and incorporating diverse cultural norms and traditions
Leadership and Vision in Education	Leadership training and professional development	Standard 5: Share Power	Human Capital: Strengthening skills, knowledge, and involvement in education
	Vision for inclusive and holistic educational experiences	Standard 6: Collaborate with the Community	Cultural Capital: Respecting and incorporating diverse cultural norms and traditions

Appendix N – Administrator Focus Group Findings

Theme	Categories	Conceptual Framework (National PTA Standards)	Theoretical Framework (Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework)
Educational Engagement	Student, Educational, and Professional Support	Standard 3: Support Student Success	Human Capital: Strengthening skills, knowledge, and involvement in education
Community and Cultural Engagement	Cultural and General Community Engagement	Standard 1: Welcome All Families Standard 6: Collaborate with the Community	Cultural Capital: Respecting and incorporating diverse cultural norms and traditions Social Capital
Organizational Practices and Crisis Management	Organizational and Crisis Handling	Standard 2: Communicate Effectively	Political Capital: Leveraging influence and networks for strategic advantage and policy success Physical Capital: Improving infrastructure to enhance access to communication and engagement
Technology, Innovation, and User Experience	Tech Innovation and User Experience	Standard 3: Support Student Success	Physical Capital: Improving infrastructure to enhance access to communication and engagement
Parental and Family Support	Family Engagement in Education	Standard 1: Welcome All Families Sharing Power	Social Capital Building partnerships for mutual support and resource sharing Human Capital
Communication and Feedback	Strategic Communication and Feedback Integration	Standard 2: Communicate Effectively	Social Capital: Building partnerships for mutual support and resource sharing
Resource and Funding Management	Resource and Funding Strategies	Standard 6: Collaborate with the Community	Financial Capital: Allocating monetary resources for investment, growth, and economic stability
Event and Activity Planning	School and Community Event Coordination	Standard 6: Collaborate with the Community	Social Capital: Building partnerships for mutual support and resource sharing Physical Capital: Improving infrastructure to enhance access to communication and engagement

Data Analysis and Application	Data-Driven Educational Decision Making	Standard 3: Support Student Success	Cultural Capital: Respecting and incorporating diverse cultural norms and traditions
Operational and Organizational Communication	Internal and External Organizational Communication	Standard 2: Communicate Effectively	Political Capital: Leveraging influence and networks for strategic advantage and policy success Social Capital

Appendix O – Administrator Overall Findings

Theme	Categories	Conceptual Framework (National PTA Standards)	Theoretical Framework (Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework)
Equitable Access	Addressing Language Barriers	Standard 3: Support Student Success	Cultural Capital: Knowledge, traditions, and practices that shape community identity.
	Desire for Increased Activities	Standard 1: Welcome All Families	Social Capital: Relationships and networks that facilitate cooperation and mutual support.
Challenges in Engagement	Balancing Roles in Small Communities	Standard 6: Collaborate with the Community	Social Capital: Relationships and networks that facilitate cooperation and mutual support.
	Overcoming Participation Barriers	Standard 4: Speak Up for Every Child	Human Capital: Skills, health, and education that contribute to community well-being.
Family Engagement Approaches	Encouraging Diverse Participation	Standard 1: Welcome All Families	Social Capital: Relationships and networks that facilitate cooperation and mutual support.
	Scheduling for Inclusivity	Standard 2: Communicate Effectively	Cultural Capital: Knowledge, traditions, and practices that shape community identity.
	Leveraging Existing Events	Standard 3: Support Student Success	Physical Capital: Infrastructure and facilities that support community activities.
Communication Strategies	Multilingual Resources	Standard 2: Communicate Effectively	Cultural Capital: Knowledge, traditions, and practices that shape community identity.
	Utilizing Technology	Standard 4: Speak Up for Every Child	Physical Capital: Infrastructure and facilities that support community activities.
	Emphasizing Transparency	Standard 5: Share Power	Political Capital: Ability to influence policies and decision-making processes.
Future Initiatives	Adapting Successful Models	Standard 3: Support Student Success	Human Capital: Skills, health, and education that contribute to community well-being.

	Introducing New Engagement Strategies	Standard 6: Collaborate with the Community	Social Capital: Relationships and networks that facilitate cooperation and mutual support.
Participatory Environment	Student-led Initiatives	Standard 5: Share Power	Human Capital: Skills, health, and education that contribute to community well-being.
	Empowering Parent Input	Standard 5: Share Power	Political Capital: Ability to influence policies and decision-making processes.

Appendix P – Parent Interview Findings

Theme	Categories	Conceptual Framework (National PTA Standards)	Theoretical Framework (Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework)
Family Engagement & Involvement	Variability in Involvement Desire for Increased Activities	Standard 1: Welcome All Families	Social Capital: Building partnerships for mutual support and resource sharing
Cultural Sensitivity & Inclusivity	Recognition of Diversity Inclusivity Concerns	Standard 1: Welcome All Families	Cultural Capital: Respecting and incorporating diverse cultural norms and traditions
Communication Methods & Platforms	Preference for Digital Communication Challenges with Technology	Standard 2: Communicate Effectively	Human Capital: Strengthening skills, knowledge, and involvement in education
Teacher Support - Academic Success	Communication with Parents Recognition of Teacher Efforts	Standard 3: Support Student Success	Human Capital: Strengthening skills, knowledge, and involvement in education
Student Independence	Monitoring Progress Encouraging Self-Reliance	Standard 3: Support Student Success	Human Capital: Strengthening skills, knowledge, and involvement in education
Academic Success & Student Needs	Importance of Parental Involvement School's Supportive Measures	Standard 3: Support Student Success	Human Capital: Strengthening skills, knowledge, and involvement in education
Community Partnerships & Support	Collaboration with Local Organizations Resistance to Change	Standard 6: Collaborate with the Community	Political Capital: Leveraging influence and networks for strategic advantage and policy success.
Event Participation	Feedback on School Events	Standard 2: Communicate Effectively	Social Capital: Building partnerships for mutual support and resource sharing

Opportunities for Engagement	Standard 6: Collaborate with the Community
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Appendix Q – 7th Grade Parent Focus Group Findings

Themes	Categories	Conceptual Framework (National PTA Standards)	Theoretical Framework (Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework)
Family Engagement	Active Parental Role	Standard 1: Welcome All Families	Social Capital: Building partnerships for mutual support and resource sharing
	Back-to-School Events	Standard 1: Welcome All Families	Social Capital: Building partnerships for mutual support and resource sharing
	Family Game Night	Standard 1: Welcome All Families	Cultural Capital: Respecting and incorporating diverse cultural norms and traditions
	Encouragement of Family Feedback	Standard 5: Share Power	Social Capital: Building partnerships for mutual support and resource sharing
Communication Effectiveness	Communication during Emergencies	Standard 4: Speak Up for Every Child	Political Capital: Leveraging influence and networks for strategic advantage and policy success
	Newsletter Utility and Content	Standard 2: Communicate Effectively	Political Capital: Leveraging influence and networks for strategic advantage and policy success
	Teacher Responsiveness	Standard 2: Communicate Effectively	Human Capital: Strengthening skills, knowledge, and involvement in education
Educational Support	Adaptation to Modern Educational Needs	Standard 6: Collaborate with the Community	Human Capital: Strengthening skills, knowledge, and involvement in education
	Special Education Compliance	Standard 4: Speak Up for Every Child	Political Capital: Leveraging influence and networks for strategic advantage and policy success
	Support for Non-English Speakers	Standard 3: Support Student Success	Human Capital: Strengthening skills, knowledge, and involvement in education
Inclusivity and Diversity	School Openness and Diversity	Standard 1: Welcome All Families	Cultural Capital: Respecting and incorporating diverse cultural norms and traditions
	Handling of Privacy Concerns	Standard 4: Speak Up for Every Child	Political Capital: Leveraging influence and networks for strategic advantage and policy success

Appendix R – 8th Grade Parent Focus Group Findings

Theme	Categories	Conceptual Framework (National PTA Standards)	Theoretical Framework (Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework)
Family Engagement	Welcoming Environment	Standard 1: Welcome All Families	Social Capital: Building partnerships for mutual support and resource sharing
Communication	Effective Paper Notifications	Standard 2: Communicate Effectively	Cultural Capital: Respecting and incorporating diverse cultural norms and traditions
Educational Support	Teacher Empathy	Standard 3: Support Student Success	Human Capital: Strengthening skills, knowledge, and involvement in education
Policy Influence	Parental Feedback	Standard 5: Share Power	Political Capital: Leveraging influence and networks for strategic advantage and policy success.
Inclusivity	Indifference to Diverse Voices	Standard 4: Speak Up for Every Child	Social Capital: Building partnerships for mutual support and resource sharing
Resource Access	Equitable Opportunities	Standard 6: Collaborate with the Community	Financial Capital: Allocating monetary resources for investment, growth, and economic stability.

Appendix S – Parent Overall Findings

Theme	Categories	Conceptual Framework (National PTA Standards)	Theoretical Framework (Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework)
Family Engagement and Involvement	Variability in Involvement	Standard 1: Welcome All Families	Social Capital: Relationships and networks that facilitate collective action and community bonding
	Desire for Increased Activities	Standard 6: Collaborate with the Community	Social Capital: Relationships and networks that facilitate collective action and community bonding
Communication Methods and Platforms	Preference for Digital Communication	Standard 2: Communicate Effectively	Physical Capital: Physical infrastructure, including technology, which supports communication and services
	Challenges with Technology	Standard 2: Communicate Effectively	Physical Capital: Physical infrastructure, including technology, which supports communication and services
Student Independence	Encouraging Self-Reliance	Standard 3: Support Student Success	Human Capital: Skills, knowledge, and personal attributes that enhance individual and collective capacity
	Monitoring Progress	Standard 3: Support Student Success	Human Capital: Skills, knowledge, and personal attributes that enhance individual and collective capacity
Community Partnerships and Support	Collaboration with Local Organizations	Standard 6: Collaborate with the Community	Social Capital: Relationships and networks that facilitate collective action and community bonding
	Resistance to Change	Standard 4: Speak Up for Every Child	Cultural Capital: Traditions, values, and norms that influence behaviors and expectations
Teacher Support - Academic Success and Student Needs	Recognition of Teacher Efforts	Standard 5: Share Power	Human Capital: Skills, knowledge, and personal attributes that enhance individual and collective capacity
	Communication with Parents	Standard 2: Communicate Effectively	Social Capital: Relationships and networks that facilitate collective action and community bonding

Cultural Sensitivity and Inclusivity	Recognition of Diversity	Standard 1: Welcome All Families	Cultural Capital: Traditions, values, and norms that influence behaviors and expectations
	Inclusivity Concerns	Standard 1: Welcoming All Families	Cultural Capital: Traditions, values, and norms that influence behaviors and expectations
Academic Success and Student Needs	Importance of Parental Involvement	Standard 3: Support Student Success	Human Capital: Skills, knowledge, and personal attributes that enhance individual and collective capacity
	School's Supportive Measures	Standard 4: Speaking Up for Every Child	Political Capital: The ability to influence standards, policies, and rules that govern the community
Event Participation	Feedback on School Events	Standard 6: Collaborate with the Community	Social Capital: Relationships and networks that facilitate collective action and community bonding
	Opportunities for Engagement	Standard 5: Share Power	Social Capital: Relationships and networks that facilitate collective action and community bonding

Appendix T – All Stakeholder Groups Findings

Theme	Categories	Conceptual Framework (National PTA Standards)	Theoretical Framework (Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework)
Communication Methods and Challenges	Preference for Digital Updates	Standard 2: Communicate Effectively	Social Capital: Building partnerships for mutual support and resource sharing
	Language Barriers	Standard 2: Communicate Effectively	Social Capital: The use of communication networks builds social relationships and knowledge sharing, fostering collaboration within the rural community.
	Shift to Digital Platforms	Standard 2: Communicate Effectively	Social Capital: Digital platforms can foster stronger connections and communication between schools, families, and communities. This facilitates more accessible, inclusive, and continuous engagement, especially in rural areas where geographical distances can be a barrier. Human Capital: By providing digital communication tools and resources, schools can better equip parents and students with the skills needed to engage effectively. It also supports staff development in digital literacy and communication techniques. Cultural Capital: Digital platforms can help share and celebrate the diverse cultures within a community, supporting more inclusive communication practices that respect different languages, traditions, and backgrounds. Physical Capital: Investing in digital infrastructure (like reliable internet access and devices) enhances communication capabilities and ensures equitable access to information across the community.

Family Engagement and Participation	Engagement Through Activities	Standard 3: Support Student Success	Cultural Capital: Respecting and incorporating diverse cultural norms and traditions
	Technology Barriers	Standard 3: Support Student Success	Physical Capital: Infrastructure and physical resources that support a community's activities, such as broadband internet, technology access, and facilities
	Desire for More Activities	Standard 3: Support Student Success	Social Capital: Networks, relationships, and connections within a community that facilitate cooperation and support.
Cultural Sensitivity and Inclusivity	Language Services	Standard 4: Speak Up for Every Child	Social Capital: Building partnerships for mutual support and resource sharing Cultural Capital: Respecting and incorporating diverse cultural norms and traditions
	Respect for Cultural Norms	Standard 4: Speak Up for Every Child	Social Capital: Supporting diversity and linguistic inclusivity fosters cultural cohesion and equitable access to resources in rural settings.
Community Partnerships and Involvement	Support for Resources	Standard 6: Collaborate with the Community	Political Capital: Leveraging influence and networks for strategic advantage and policy success Social Capital: Building partnerships for mutual support and resource sharing
	Community-School Collaboration	Standard 6: Collaborate with the Community	Social Capital: Community collaboration leverages social and political capital to advocate for resources, thus supporting local schools.
	Community Views on Engagement	Standard 6: Collaborate with the Community	Social Capital: Relationships, networks, and norms that facilitate collective action and social cohesion
Academic Support and Student Needs	Importance of Parental Involvement	Standard 1: Welcome All Families	Human Capital: Strengthening skills, knowledge, and involvement in education
	Differentiation for Diverse Needs	Standard 1: Welcome All Families	Human Capital: Focus on parental involvement and personalized student support addresses educational outcomes in rural areas

	Emotional Support in Conferences	Standard 3: Support Student Success	Intellectual Capital: Enhances the overall value and effectiveness of the knowledge sharing environment.
Teacher Interaction and Support	Teacher-Parent Communication	Standard 5: Share Power	Social Capital: Building partnerships for mutual support and resource sharing
	Teacher Support and Appreciation	Standard 2: Communicate Effectively	Social Capital: Interaction between teachers and families reinforces social networks, enhancing cooperation and support in educational settings.
Tools and Resources – Post-Pandemic Adjustments	Utilization of Educational Apps	Standard 2: Communicate Effectively	Physical Capital: Improving infrastructure to enhance access to communication and engagement
	Shifts in Communication Tools	Standard 2: Communicate Effectively	Intellectual Capital: Post-pandemic adjustments reflect shifts in digital infrastructure, contributing to the community's educational wealth.
Engagement Challenges and Strategies	Overcoming Barriers to Participation	Standard 3: Support Student Success	Social Capital: Building partnerships for mutual support and resource sharing Human Capital: Strengthening skills, knowledge, and involvement in education
	Adapting Engagement Methods for Diverse Needs	Standard 4: Speak Up for Every Child	Social Capital: Adapting strategies for engaging families strengthens both social networks and human development in rural education.